GEORGE CANTERBURY'S WILL

MRS. HENRY WOOD

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A Novel.

BY

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"EAST LYNNE," "THE CHANNINGS," "JOHNNY LUDLOW,"
ETC., ETC.

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CHAPTER I.

IN THE EVENING LIGHT.

NOTHING could be more beautiful. The sun was sinking in the west, casting its rays on the long line of blue, transparent water. It shone on the white sails of the pleasure-boats, on the fishing-craft putting out for their night's work; it brought into clearer view the fine vessels passing far away on their course; it played on the chain of mountains that terminated the prospect to the right, stretching their undulating outlines miles into the distance. Calm, soothing still. The turbulent waves were unseen this evening; the froth and foam rose not. All the world seemed to be at rest from its troubles, its sinful passions and petty strifes, as if it would instil into men's hearts a fortetaste of that peace which shall be realized only in heaven.

The place, Little Bay, was a small quiet Welsh watering-place, where the bathing was good, the air bracing, and the sea-view of great extent. Little frequented in those earlier days, it was of small pretensions and very reasonable, entertaining no prevision of the fashionable resort it was destined afterwards to become.

Within a large open bow-window, partly looking out on the scene that one of them so loved, partly listening to the desultory talk of a gentleman who stood outside leaning on its frame, were two girls. She who was next to him, answering his repartees before they were well spoken, was richly dressed in charming blue silk and lace—a fair, bright girl of seventeen, in appearance almost a child; her laughing eyes of a dark

blue, her hair dark brown and luxuriant, her cheeks rivalling the hue of the damask rose—altogether as lovely a vision of beauty as ever enthralled the senses of man. The other was very nice-looking also, but of quieter aspect. A gentle girl, she, just nineteen, with large shy hazel eyes, hair of a lighter shade of brown, a complexion fair and rather pale—a soft sweet face that was pleasant to look upon. She was taller than her companion, and yet not more than of middle height; her dress was a simple muslin, costing at most but a few shillings. You cannot judge by dress of the ways and means of its wearer, as all the world knows. The richly-dressed girl in her blue silk and its costly Honiton—Caroline Kage—had been straitened in means all her life, and never expected to be lifted out of the straits except by some fortunate marriage; the other would probably inherit at least a hundred thousand pounds, for she was one of the daughters of the rich Mr. Canterbury, of Chilling.

And he who talked to them—Thomas Kage? He was a barrister by profession, and had to work hard for his living, not expecting to be helped by so much as a shilling from any one in the world. A slight-made man, appearing from this circumstance almost of middle height, but not so in reality. His hair and eyes were dark; his face, nothing to boast of, was honest, genial, true. People called Thomas Kage "plain," and plain he was, judging him by the severe lines of beauty; but the countenance was a *good* countenance, carrying its own index straight to the hearts of discerning men.

It was the third week in September; they had gone to the seaside the third week in August; so that for a month now he and these two girls had been daily, almost hourly companions. The result was one that is not rare. Which of the two had learnt to love him most, it would be difficult to say. Millicent Canterbury had never met him in her life before; Caroline Kage had, though not frequently: he and she were cousins several degrees removed.

"Why are you so serious, Miss Canterbury?" he suddenly asked, bending his head forward to look at her where she sat, a little back from the window.

"Am I serious?" she returned, a pink blush mantling her

smooth cheek at his words, and she bent her too-conscious face to hide it.

"At least, you are silent."

"I was listening to you and Caroline."

"I think you generally prefer listening to talking," he said, a smile of rare sweetness breaking over his lips. That smile was the one sole beauty of Thomas Kage's face, redeeming it from the reproach of plainness while it lasted.

"Do I?"

Do I! Carelessly though the words were given, Millicent Canterbury knew that the charge was true, and the pink blush increased to crimson. When in his presence, she could no more have been outspoken than a mute: her love for him was earnest, real, passionate; and this same love, as most of us know, chains the lips when in the presence of its idol.

"And do you agree with Caroline or with me?"

"With you," Millicent was obliged to confess, for she was of a straightforward nature, knowing nothing of evasion; but the avowal caused the crimson to glow yet more; "for I feel sure Mrs. Kage will not allow us to go."

They had been discussing a projected sail for the morrow, these two girls, with Miss Annesley as companion, who was staying with them, and Mr. Kage as protector. Caroline spoke of it as an event decided; he had quietly declared it would turn out "all moonshine."

"You will see," continued Miss Kage—"Leta, what in the world are you blushing for?—And I think it is exceedingly wicked of you, Thomas, to throw cold water on what I propose."

Thomas Kage laughed.

"Cold water! Ah, Caroline, if you only knew how hot the water I would throw, if it would bring the sail!" he pursued in tones of graver meaning. "The prospect of taking you is delightful, but it will not be realized. As Miss Canterbury says, your mother would not permit it."

"It is so stupid of her to be afraid of the water," said Caroline hastily. "As if people were drowned in a calm sea."

He made no reply, only glanced at her, and something like emotion passed over her lovely face. She was conscious, and he was conscious, that Mrs. Kage's veto would not be laid

upon the expedition on account of any danger they might incur, although it was true that she was a coward in regard to the water, but because she was beginning to dread this frequent and close companionship.

"Mrs. Kage regards the sea as a treacherous ogre, waiting always to swallow up the unwary who may venture on it, you know, Caroline," he remarked indifferently, as he opened a book he held, and turned over its pages.

"What will you say to me to-morrow morning if I meet you with the news that I have persuaded mamma into consenting?"

"I shall say you are the dearest cousin in the world——"

"That's easily said, when you have no other," she petulantly interrupted.

"And the most clever of diplomatists," he continued. "You should let a man finish, Caroline. I wish you success, but I have no hope that the wish will be realized."

"What kind of wish do you call that, pray?"

"A faithless one, I suppose."

"Just so. And I will convict you of shame when I bring you mamma's consent."

"So be it, Caroline," he answered.—"And you, Miss Canterbury? You have not said you will go. Will you?"

"Yes, I—I think so," was the reply, given with some hesitation. "I don't much care for the sea."

"Why, I have heard you say that you love the sea."

"I love to look at it. Seeing it as we do from these windows, I cannot imagine anything in the world more beautiful. I could look at it for ever, and not weary; watching its changing colours; speculating on the vessels; seeing what they do in the little boats cruising off the land. My love for the sea is something strange. But *on* it I am almost as great a coward as Mrs. Kage; and in rough weather I am ill."

He laughed. Caroline Kage spoke rather testily.

"There's no particular necessity for your going into raptures over the sea, Leta, if you do love it."

"No," said Leta meekly, "of course not."

They called her "Leta" almost always. When a little child, before she was able to speak plain, she had so pro-

nounced her own name Millicent. The appellation had never left her, and never would now.

The sun went down in a blaze of gold. The clear and beautiful opal tints, seen only in the north-west sky, succeeded to it; and still Thomas Kage stood on.

Suddenly, as if prompted by some momentary recollection, he removed his arms from the window to look at his watch; and Caroline saw the movement with a jealous eye and failing heart. It seemed to foreshadow his departure; and she would willingly have kept him by her side for ever.

"Why do you not come in, Thomas? The idea of having stayed outside all this time!"

"I cannot come in, now. I promised my mother to be with her for tea."

"How many more evenings will you tell us that? Your mother is very exacting."

"Never was there a mother less so," he rejoined emphatically, a glow on his honest face. "But she likes to have me with her at tea; and I have been keeping her waiting for it. Tiresome syrens, both of you, to enchain a fellow so, and cause him to forget the hour-glass. Farewell, and reformation to you."

He turned down the gravel-path with a quick step—the house stood back in a garden—passed through the gate, and nodded gaily as he raised his hat. It was as if a shadow had fallen on the hearts of both; and they listened in silence and sadness to the echo of his fleet footsteps.

He had set off running as though he were a schoolboy. Rounding a bend of the road, a lady came into view, and he had to slacken speed. It was Miss Annesley; she had come to Little Bay with Mrs. Kage.

"Are you bound for Mrs. Garston's?" she stopped to ask.

"Not now. I am hastening home to my mother."

"That is well," returned Miss Annesley, quaintly. "Had you been going to Mrs. Garston, I should have said, don't go. She is cross this evening; cross with you."

"I know I ought to have gone there," he confessed, a smile breaking over his face. "That's it, I suppose?"

"That is it. And I was charged to tell you, if we by

chance met, that she would not receive you now until to-morrow. She means it, Mr. Kage."

"Very well. I'll go and make my peace with her then. Thank you. Farewell for the present."

Resuming his quick pace, he gained the door of a pretty cottage, also facing the sea. A staid, hard woman of fifty, as tall as a maypole, admitted him.

"You have kept your mother waiting a long while, Mr. Thomas," was the greeting he received, delivered with a severe countenance. "She'd not let the tea be made till you came in."

"I am very sorry, Dorothy," he answered, never thinking, as most men at his age would, that it was nearly time Dorothy left off her lectures. She had nursed him when a baby, and been his mother's ever-faithful attendant since, through good and ill, for eight-and-twenty years. "I did not happen to look at my watch, and the time slipped on."

"I think I'd leave the coming home to meals an open question, if I were you, sir, while we are here. My lady ought to have had her tea early this evening, for she's a fearful bad headache come on."

Keeping the "meals" waiting by so much as five minutes was in the catalogue of Dorothy's cardinal sins; and Thomas Kage was aware he had not been strictly punctual of late.

"A headache!" he repeated in some surprise; for Lady Kage was not subject to the malady.

"Yes, she have," said Dorothy, as Thomas went in.

At the open window of the sitting-room sat Lady Kage—a gentle, thoughtful woman, with a countenance as good as his own, and a voice as sweet. She had only reached the age which women are apt to call middle life; but she was in ill-health, and her delicate face looked careworn.

"My darling mother!" he said, kissing her fondly; "I am so sorry."

"Sorry for what, Thomas?"

"For keeping you waiting tea. Why did you not take it? Dorothy says your head aches."

She kept his hand in hers; and her eyes, looking up to his, were full of smiles.

"Dorothy has been talking, I see."

"That she has; giving it me well. But you ought to have had your tea, mother dear. You don't know how these things pain me."

"They need not, Thomas."

"They do, though, and bring home to me all my selfish ingratitude. If I were wanting my tea, and you out, I should be sure to order it without thought of you."

"That you would not, if you expected me home; no, though your head were splitting for want of it. And mine is not."

"I don't know how I came to let the time slip on, unheeded. I was talking with Miss Canterbury and Caroline. What can have given you a headache, mother?"

"I think I walked too far this morning. I mean to have a whole day's rest to-morrow indoors."

It may almost be said that Lady Kage answered mechanically; for her thoughts, as she spoke, were far away. The time had slipped on, unheeded, "talking with Miss Canterbury and Caroline."

Mr. Kage's apologies of late had been so similar to this present one, that the suspicion, hovering in his mother's mind, grew greater and greater. That he must be learning to love one of those two young ladies she felt as sure of as though she could read into his heart. Which of them was it?

Dorothy brought in the tea-tray, and placed it on the side of the table farthest from her mistress.

"Mr. Thomas can pour it out this evening, as you feel ill, my lady," decided she, with the privileged authority of one accustomed to have her way.—"It's quite ready, sir."

He laughed as he sat down, saying he hoped he should not put the cream and sugar into the tea-pot instead of the cups.

Thomas Kage had not roughed it in chambers or lodgings as three-fourths of the young men have: his mother's home in London was his home, and his mother indulgently did all things for him. The world little guessed how very simple the home was, or how utterly happy they were in it. Mother and son have rarely been so bound in heart together.

Awkwardly as most unaccustomed men, Thomas Kage

served his mother with her tea first, and then poured out his own. He was quite unconscious that his cup was consequently the stronger of the two. He would have given her every good at his own expense that this world can bestow, and thought it no sacrifice.

"You say you have been with the two young ladies this evening?" observed Lady Kage.

"Are you sure I have given you enough cream and sugar?—Yes, I have been with them."

"As usual—as usual, Thomas. Are you drifting into love for either of them?"

"Mother!"

It was all very well to say "Mother!" and to say it with a start; but Lady Kage could not avoid seeing that her son's face grew red and conscious as a girl's. She knew now that she was not mistaken. He upset some water on the tea-tray, in a sudden effort to drown the tea-pot.

"Which of the two is it, Thomas?" she quietly asked.

By this time he was recovering self-possession and equanimity. He looked at his mother in the twilight, and then, pausing, sent his good, dark, candid eyes rather far out to sea through the open window.

"Mother, I think you are mistaken; I hope you are. The maddest thing I could do would be to fall in love with any girl, no matter whom she might be. It may be years—years and years—before my circumstances enable me to think of a wife, if they ever do."

"That is just it, Thomas. Otherwise——"

"Otherwise I might be at liberty to fall in love to-morrow," he said, with a laugh. "Ah, yes; we all have to bend to circumstances."

Lady Kage did not give up her opinion, but would not seem to pursue it.

"Which of the two, if either, would your choice have fallen upon, Thomas? Miss Canterbury?"

"Miss Canterbury!" he echoed in surprise so genuine that something like a chill struck across his mother's heart, and destroyed a vision that had been rearing itself in fondness before her mind. "You must be dreaming, mother dear.

Miss Canterbury will count her fortune by scores of thousands, perhaps by hundreds of thousands. Old Canterbury may be worth a million."

"If Millicent Canterbury is rich in wealth, you are rich in worth, Thomas. A union between you would not be unequal."

He smiled, and shook his head at the thought of his mother's partiality; but his answer was given in a tone of decision.

"It would be so unequal, mother, that I should never attempt to entertain it for a moment—no, not though I were dying of love for her. But the thought of loving Millicent Canterbury has never entered my head; so be at ease."

"I could not have wished a better wife for you than Millicent Canterbury; I never met a sweeter girl," spoke Lady Kage. "As to Caroline, Millicent is worth a thousand of her."

"Caroline is as poor as I am; and therefore, to speak of marriage in connection with her, would be talking nonsense," returned Mr. Kage, an embarrassment in his tone that his mother did not like to hear, for it betrayed too surely where his affections lay. And then ensued a silence.

Thomas broke it. Lifting his head, after a pause, he looked full at his mother in the deepening twilight, as if he deemed it well to set the matter at rest, for himself as well as for her.

"I was twenty-seven last July, mother, as you know, and I am earning so little at my profession, as you also know, getting on so slowly in it—not at all, in fact—that the chances are I may attain forty years without being able to keep a wife as I should like to keep her. Believe me, therefore, there is no danger, no hope that I can, or shall, fall in love to any purpose. I may cast a fancy here or there, but nothing is likely to result from it."

"I should not wish you to fall into hopeless love," spoke Lady Kage, in low tones.

"Nor I. But if I did, I could bear it."

The beautiful opal tints in the clear north-western sky grew less distinct in the fading light. Lady Kage, her head growing more painful, went up to bed; and Thomas sat alone, with his own reflections.

No, there might be no thought of marriage for him. As to this pleasant dream he had been lately falling into, why, let him dream on while he might, it would not be for so very long. In October the seaside party would disperse, he and his mother for London, the others for their far-away home. And then? Then would come for him the old working life again, during which he should *forget*—forget, or pretend to do so. And she——

"Are there no lights wanted here?"

The interruption came from Dorothy. She had opened the door, cross still, to ask the question; and Thomas Kage awoke out of himself to find it was as dark as it would be that night.

No, no lights yet. The clock was striking eight, and he put on his hat and went out.

Calm, warm, light and lovely was the night. The clear sky was luminous, the lights from the different vessels on the sea shone like stars. Passing down a turning, he came to a house that, in comparison with the cottage rented by his mother, looked like a mansion. A footman answered his knock.

"Has Mrs. Garston retired to her room?"

"No, sir, not yet."

"Say to her, then, with my kind regards, that I will come to see her after breakfast in the morning."

Regard for the very old lady prompted him to come and say this. Mrs. Garston was eighty years of age. Never had living man a kinder heart than Thomas Kage, and he was grieved to have failed in his customary visit to her. And he departed on his way again.

On the lawn before Mrs. Kage's house, flitting about, were the two girls. Mr. Kage joined them. Now they stood together at the railings, watching the aforesaid lights, and tracking the vesels on their silent course; now they paced the walks, now rested on the green bench under the mulberry-tree. But the same low, unconsciously-tender interchange of converse was ever there. The companionship, becoming all too sweet, was not interrupted. Every minute, every hour, as they went by, only added strength to the links of the chain by which Fate was binding the three hearts together, indis-

solubly, but in an untoward fashion, as it is in the nature of Fate to do.

"Love took up the glass of Time, and turned it in his glowing hands;
Every moment, lightly shaken, ran itself in golden sands."

They would have lingered on until midnight, but at nearly ten o'clock out came Miss Annesley. She was a good and true young woman, wanting some years of thirty, amiable, prudent, sensible, and calm of temperament; as it is only right the daughter of an earnest clergyman should be.

"Mrs. Kage is so vexed that you should be out of doors. She wishes you to come in at once."

"Oh, mamma has woke up at last, has she?" responded Caroline, carelessly. "A little the worse in temper for her long sleep, I suppose."

"You must know, Caroline, that it is time you did come in," said Miss Annesley.

"There, don't preach, Sarah; we are coming." And Millicent was the first to hasten in.

Years and years before—say thirty—an officer who had risen rapidly in India, Colonel Sir Charles Kage, K.C.B., came home on a three years' leave, with his wife and little daughter. He was without connections, in the sense that the word is generally understood, only possessing a few simple relatives. But a K.C.B. is sure to find friends; and Sir Charles's London residence was soon overflowing with them. Amidst others, frequenting it, was a peer who had nearly come to the end of his income—his children having considerably assisted in its disposal—and consequently he put off a small portion of his superfluous pride: Lord Gunse.

The object which had chiefly brought Sir Charles Kage home was the ill-health of his wife. Just for a few weeks she rallied, but only to sink again; and in less than six months from the day of their landing in England, she died. The little girl, Charlotte, was six years old then, and Sir Charles immediately took a young lady into his house as her governess. She was a Miss Carr, a gentle, retiring, unpretending girl, who kept herself in all humility out of the way of Sir Charles's guests, and learnt to love the little Charlotte. If the guests by

chance saw her, they took no notice of her. Lord Gunse and Lady Gunse and the Honourable Misses Gunse quite ignored her. In point of fact those aristocratic people, had they condescended to think of the nursery governess at all, would have classed her as a domestic. She was of no family; perhaps had never had as much as a father and mother.

Lady Gunse and the Misses Gunse were at that time very much at Sir Charles Kage's house, consoling the bereaved widower. It was thought by the maid-servants (who are generally shrewd observers) that their master might have had any one of the three honourable young ladies for the asking. A fine man of only five-and-forty, a K.C.B. already, and with plenty of service before him, would be a prize undoubtedly in the matrimonial market.

What, then, must have been the shocked indignation of this noble family to awake one morning to the news of Sir Charles Kage's marriage? Just twelve months after the death of his wife he quietly led to church the nursery governess, saying nothing to any one. When taxed with his crime by Lord Gunse (out of pure regard for Sir Charles, of course, and his blighted interests), the brave soldier wrung the peer's hand, and avowed that the excellent qualities of Maria Carr had won his esteem and love, and that he could not have given the little Charlotte a more loving and admirable mother had he chosen from the whole world. Of course she was young; he did not deny that; but every year as it went by would remedy the defect.

"She is of no family," groaned the wrathful peer.

"No family!" repeated Sir Charles. "My dear lord, she is of as good a family as my own."

And thus the patient, humble governess, Maria Carr, had become the second Lady Kage.

Poor young wife! A child was born to her in due course, a little boy, who was named Thomas Charles Carr, and she was the happiest of the happy. Sir Charles waited for the christening, and then went back to India, for his leave was up. Lady Kage did not accompany him. He was tender of her, as though she were some rare and precious plant, and he knew she was scarcely yet strong enough to bear the fatigue of travel.

In the course of the year she and Charlotte and the boy-baby should come out to him, he said; and so they parted. Parted to meet no more in this world, for Sir Charles Kage died very soon after regaining India.

Upon her slender pension, which would die with her, Lady Kage had lived since, devoting herself to the two children, her step-daughter and son, with equal care and love. None save herself and Dorothy, and perhaps her dutiful, thoughtful boy, knew how she had managed and contrived her income, so as to educate them well and give him his terms at college. Dorothy—faithful to her young mistress, stern to every one else, eating the bread of carefulness, and seeing that the rest did so, doing the work of ten—made a boast of waiting on her lady as efficiently in her one sole person as if she had had at command a host of helpmates.

So the years passed on, and the children grew up. Charlotte married; Thomas qualified himself for the Bar. And when it might have seemed that Lady Kage could have taken some ease from her solicitude and care, her health began to fail. Very gradually at first. Even Dorothy saw nothing of it; but the development of the disease, which the doctors thought was connected with the heart, was more rapid, and anxiety supervened. Not yet alarm. This visit to the quiet Welsh watering-place was made at her son's earnest solicitation, in the hope that change of air might restore her. How anxiously Thomas looked at her morning after morning he strove to hide from all eyes: and he was forced to confess to his heart secretly that he did not discern much improvement.

Back again, for an instant, to the time of Colonel Sir Charles Kage's residence in London. At his house there was frequently to be met a distant cousin of his, Alfred Kage, for whom he had purchased a commission, and otherwise befriended. He was a very handsome and gentlemanly young fellow, good-natured, empty-headed. The Honourable Misses Gunse liked to talk nonsense with him, especially the youngest, Caroline, who was as empty-headed as himself. After the startling marriage of Sir Charles, Lord Gunse gave orders that the intimacy between the two houses should cease. This was accomplished; but Lieutenant Kage and Caroline Gunse had

grown really attached to each other: and, some two or three years afterwards, she married him in defiance of parental displeasure. They had nothing but his pay; and therefore the union, to a person of the Honourable Caroline's expensive tastes, could not be said to have turned out felicitously. He lived but about ten years, attained to a captaincy only, and left her with one child, Caroline, almost an infant. Mrs. Kage, who was the Honourable Mrs. Kage in spite of her poverty, and prided herself upon the fact, retired to Chilling, a village on the borders of Wales, noted for its lovely scenery and for the cheapness of both rent and provisions, and there established herself. She had her pension, and also a small income left her by one of her sisters—altogether about five hundred a year. The child, Caroline, was turned seventeen now, more lovely than her mother used to be, and quite as wilful.

It was somewhat curious that Mrs. Kage and Lady Kage should have come to sojourn by accident this year at the same watering-place. They had met occasionally in the past thirty years; but the old dislike and scorn felt for the governess, who had forgotten herself so completely as to suffer a K.C.B. to marry her, had little, if at all, abated. The Honourable Mrs. Kage was decorously civil when face to face with her; but she generally had recourse to an essence-bottle if Lady Kage's name was by chance mentioned, as if it brought some infection with it. Mrs. Kage had grown into a sigh-away, die-away lady now, liking to pass her time on a sofa, surrounded by shawls and scents and easy indolence. Her soft languor and show of sweetness, her subdued voice of affectation, might have taken in a saint; but there lived not a woman in this world of deceit more utterly heartless, more intensely, selfishly alive to her own interests, than the widow of Alfred Kage.

It is not a nice thing to say of a woman that she is made up of craft within and artlessness without; but it must be said of Mrs. Kage, for it was the simple truth. Even in this visit of hers to the seaside, she had craftily contrived to come at the cost of others. But for having her expenses paid, she could not have ventured there at all. The two young ladies she had brought with her—Sarah Annesley, the only child of the Rector of Chilling, and Millicent, the youngest daughter of the

wealthy George Canterbury—had their share of the cost so liberally provided, especially the latter, that Mrs. Kage's pocket escaped scot-free, as she had meant it to do. In her sweetly-artless manner, she had affectionately enlarged to Mr. Canterbury on the necessity of some bracing sea-air for his youngest and prettiest daughter; she had assured old Parson Annesley it would be more than good for Sarah; she had warmly enlisted the wishes of the two young ladies themselves; and the thing was done.

They came to Little Bay; and Mrs. Kage was not agreeably surprised to find that Lady Kage, with her son, had also taken possession of a cottage in the same place, not three days before. Mrs. Kage, making the best of things, was civil, but capricious and affected in manner, and held herself as much aloof as she could. She need not have feared; Lady Kage was too ill to seek even for her society; but Thomas, quite unconscious that Mrs. Kage looked down on his mother, or wished to slight her, grew intimate with them, and was continually at their house. Had he been compelled to say which of the two ladies bore the higher position, he might in his simplicity have awarded it to Lady Kage. So, how was it likely to cross his mind that his mother was despised?

Miss Annesley, as you have seen, came forth to the garden to interrupt the subtly-dangerous companionship, and bid them enter. On the chintz sofa, having woke up from a longer evening nap than usual, sat Mrs. Kage, with her fan and her essence-bottles—a small, slender gentlewoman, with a faded face and a faded cap, and faded straw-coloured hair. The cheeks would have been faded too, but for the delicate carmine daily given to them in her toilet-chamber. She took out the stopper of her smelling-salts as they entered, and held it to her nose, speaking softly.

"My dear children, how could you think of being out in the air so late? Did *you* keep them, Thomas Kage?" with a slight accession of acidity.

"I am not sure but I did; and I have come in to take the blame," he lightly answered, in the ever-cordial tones of his true voice. "But it is a warm, genial night, Mrs. Kage—one to tempt even you."

Mrs. Kage languidly opened her fan, and did not seem to hear. She had the gift of being deaf when occasion needed it.

Caroline went to the piano. Sometimes he sang with them, or stood by listening to their songs. She glanced round for him now.

"No, Caroline, I cannot stay to-night."

But that Caroline turned her face, and kept it turned, Mrs. Kage might have read the look of blank disappointment which rose at the words. It was getting late, he added, and his mother was ill.

"Quite right, certainly," spoke Mrs. Kage. "Don't you think that your mother—ah—gives way a little?" she continued, having paused to flirt some drops out of her cologne-water phial.

"Gives way! My mother?" he rejoined in surprise. "If you only knew how earnest and energetic she is in all her duties, you would not fancy so. My great fear now is, that she is exerting herself beyond her strength, simply because she will not give way to illness."

"Possibly," rejoined Mrs. Kage, with gentle indifference, as she resumed her fan. "Good night to you, if you must go."

In an opportunity that occurred presently, when she and her daughter were alone, Mrs. Kage took occasion to remark, in her languid manner, that she thought they had rather too much of Thomas Kage's company, and to wonder why he came. Caroline laughed; a forced laugh. The words seemed to be spoken without ulterior motive; but she was quite conscious that her mother shot a keen glance at her from the depths of her cold light eyes.

"What if I were to tell you, mamma, that he comes for Leta?"

For once in her life, Mrs. Kage was startled into sincerity. The notion of connecting Thomas Kage's visits with Millicent Canterbury had never presented itself to her mind.

"For Leta?"

"One cannot help one's thoughts, mamma. Of course, it is all pure nonsense; it could not turn out anything else, with Thomas Kage's prospects; but I'm sure there is a little bit of fancy between them, especially on Leta's side."

Caroline's pretty face wore a heightened colour as she toyed

with one of her mother's essence-bottles. Perfectly conscious was she of the deliberate deceit. She did not scruple to speak it, for it threw off suspicion from herself.

"Dear me!"

"And he wants to take us all for a sail to-morrow—Sarah and Leta and me. I promised for them; I knew you would let us go."

Mrs. Kage leaned back on the sofa, her mind relieved. For Caroline to fall in love where there was no money, would have been intolerable—her own fate enacted over again; but Leta Canterbury was different. If she and Thomas Kage chose to lapse into a liking for each other, why, they must get out of it again in the best way they could. Selfish, selfish woman!

"Yes," she said; "I don't mind your going for a sail, with Sarah to chaperone you, should the sea be calm. I suppose he understands the management of boats."

CHAPTER II.

DOWN AT CHILLING.

A STATELY mansion bordering upon Wales, and resting on a gentle eminence, was the far-famed residence of George Canterbury. Its description must be deferred to a later chapter. Through the open park, across the stately terraces, up the broad steps into the spacious hall we must go now.

The view commanded from the windows was beautiful. Sunny dale, sheltering woods, silvery brooks, that murmured as they ran gently through mossy glens, trees waving in the breeze, hills with their lights and shades ever changing—giving to an imaginative mind pictures of the flowery plains of Arcadia.

In one of the various rooms that opened on either side of the hall, was the eldest daughter of George Canterbury. The room was of magnificent proportions; she was as a magnificent queen in it. Her gleaming silk swept the ground as she stood, tall and upright, before the window, her head held a little back, its natural position. She was rather a large woman, with a

comely face of power, and clearly-cut features; her hair was black, her eyes were dark grey. The landscape on which she looked was no summer scene of green glade and gladness; far and near it was one white spotless plain of snow. The January sun shone brightly, the robins piped from the snowy trees.

"I think we shall have a thaw," she observed to her sister Jane, who sat at the table writing.

Jane Canterbury looked up from her desk. "I hope not. I so dislike a thaw."

"So do I; but it is an evil that must follow snow, and the sooner it's over the better."

"Have you any message to Lydia?"

"No; only my love. I wrote to her yesterday."

Jane Canterbury dipped her pen in the ink, but did not immediately resume her writing. She glanced again at her sister.

"Do you know, I think that their not coming down for Christmas has made a very disagreeable impression on papa. I mean Lydia and her husband."

"Disagreeable! In what way?" asked Miss Canterbury. "They could not help it. He was too ill to come."

"Of course. Papa does not blame them. He began talking about it yesterday evening when you were at the Rectory, saying that the break-up of the family Christmas-party looked like a foreshadowing of the breaking-up of the family itself."

"That was done, so to say, when Edgar died, counting from the year that we lost mamma," observed Miss Canterbury, in the low steady tones with which she had schooled herself to mention her dead brother's name.

"I said so to papa nearly in the same words," returned Jane, "and he began to cry a little. I think—I think——"

"What do you think, Jane?" asked Miss Canterbury, wonderingly, for Jane's hesitation had come to a pause.

"Well, I cannot help thinking that papa is not quite so strong as he was," was Jane's answer, given with a good deal of deprecation. "In vigour of mind; I do not mean in health."

Miss Canterbury made no answer. Of clear and vigorous intellect herself, of quick perception and sound common sense, she, dutiful and loving daughter though she was, could not be

ignorant that Mr. Canterbury's intellect had been all his life commonplace. She bent forward as if something in the white landscape had attracted her attention, and before the silence was broken, Millicent entered with her walking things on.

"Where are you going, Leta?" asked the elder sister, in tones of authority.

"Oh, to five hundred places."

"In this snow?"

"As if it would hurt me, Miss Canterbury! I like walking in the snow above everything."

"Do you, young lady! I hope you have good snow-boots on."

Leta held up one foot with a laugh, to show how thick the boots were. She wore a pretty bonnet of bright violet, some white blonde lace shading and setting off the fair, delicate cheeks, and sweet hazel eyes. Her dress was violet; her black-velvet mantle was edged with some kind of rare fur.

"And where are the five hundred places?"

"As if I could enumerate them all!" returned Leta, lightly. "The Rectory will be the first, and the schools the next, and then Mrs. Kage's, and then—I think papa wants a message taken to old Fry's," she concluded; "I am going to ask him. Good-bye."

"You must be home to luncheon, Leta."

"Oh yes, if I can. If not, please put by a little bread-and-butter for me. Nothing else."

Leta shut the door, and crossed the hall to her father's study. George Canterbury—a tall, thin, fair man, some years turned sixty—sat reading near the fire, in his spectacles. His auburn hair was thinning rapidly; in fact, not to mince the matter, the top of his head was getting bald; and the crows'-feet were deepening round the corners of his eyes. All of which troubled Mr. Canterbury. He had been a vain man all his life, and would be to its end. The thin face was handsome still, though not displaying any great strength of intellect. The nose and mouth were beautifully formed, but the forehead receded much. His daughters Jane and Millicent would have been very like him but for this last defect, from which their faces were free.

"Papa, don't you want some message taken to John Fry?" inquired Leta.

"No, my dear, not now," replied Mr. Canterbury, putting aside his newspaper, and turning his kindly blue eyes on her. "I have sent Neel to him."

"Oh, very well; that will be one place less, then."

"You will call at the parsonage, Millicent, and see how the poor old man is."

"I am going there first, papa."

"Do so, child. And if he would like some grapes, or some——"

"Oh, papa, Miss Canterbury, you know, remembers all that," was Leta's interruption.

They were in the habit, in a playful kind of way, of calling the elder sister "Miss Canterbury."

"Yes, I hope so. I think I'll step down myself presently; the snow's not very bad between here and the parsonage. Tell them I'm coming."

"Very well, papa. Good-bye."

Her other calls made, Leta Canterbury turned to the residence of Mrs. Kage, a small, pretty villa, with low French windows. Caroline saw her coming, and ran out regardless of the snow, shaking a shower of it from the laurels as she brushed past them. Her dark-blue eyes were animated; her cheeks as bright as a June rose.

"What good fairy sent you here, Leta?"

"The fairy was myself. Why?"

"He is come!" whispered Caroline.

"Who?"

"Who! As if you needed to ask. He came down to Aberton on business yesterday, and walked here this morning."

With a bright blood-red flush rising to her face—with a sudden coursing of every vein and pulse—with a sweet feeling of intense bliss, as if heaven had opened to her, Millicent Canterbury stood for a moment speechless. Caroline laughed. Similar emotion had been hers only an hour ago, at the unexpected appearance of Thomas Kage: and she did not mistake its signs in another.

In later years, when certain events in the chances and

changes of life plunged Caroline, young still, into awful misery and brought her very near to the grave, a remembrance of the deliberate deceit she had practised on Millicent Canterbury was not the least amongst the catalogue of errors that stung her conscience. From the night at the seaside, when she had given the lying hint to her mother, Caroline had set herself, after the manner of girls, to tease Leta about Thomas Kage. "He loves you," was her reiterated whisper; and Millicent, covered with blushes, never dreamt that she was being purposely deceived. Caroline was playing a false part still, now and always.

A matter of moment connected with Mr. Kage's profession had brought him down to Aberton, a large town about three miles distant from Chilling, and he took the opportunity to walk over. On his way to the presence of Caroline the snowy road seemed as a soft carpet of velvet. How his heart had fed on her image since they parted in October, he would not have liked the world to know. Mrs. Kage, treating the visit as one of common courtesy, paid solely from the accident of his being in the neighbourhood, and never supposing but that her daughter looked upon it with similar indifference, received him civilly, and condescended to inquire with quite a show of interest after the health of Lady Kage.

She was sitting back on her comfortable sofa, drawn to the fire, when Millicent went in; a soft down cushion covered with embroidered silk was behind her, another beside her; her scent-bottles lay on the pretty little coffee-table at hand; a pastille burnt in a saucer, scenting the room like a Roman Catholic oratory. Thomas Kage, taking his elbow from the mantel-piece, advanced to shake hands with Millicent. She met him with a flushed, conscious, downcast face, and stood in shyness and silence.

"I am so glad to see you," he said in his cordial, earnest tone, for Millicent was a great favourite of his. "I am here only for an hour."

"You timed your visit well, Miss Millicent," spoke Mrs. Kage, languidly playing with the chain of her eye-glass. "Did you come on purpose, knowing Mr. Kage would be here?"

"No, indeed," replied Millicent, vehemently, half-crying with

confusion at the sudden charge. "I did not think—I did not know anything about Mr. Kage. I came for my music."

Thomas Kage laughed at the eagerness, but suspected not that there could be a cause for it. Caroline—false girl!—telegraphed a meaning look to her mother, as much as to say she did not believe the denial. Leta turned her hot face to the piano, and kept it turned away from them.

"Can you let me have the music, Caroline?" she asked, touching some pieces that lay there. "Olive accuses me of having lent it to you to avoid practising it myself; she knows I dislike difficult pieces."

"I don't think you have any very great talent for music, my dear Miss Millicent," observed Mrs. Kage, lifting her thin white hand with its glittering rings. "It is a great gift—peculiar, I may almost say, to the Gunse family, for we all had it largely,—as your mother knew," looking at Thomas Kage, "when she was governess at Sir Charles's. Caroline inherits it from me."

"I am sure I have not any gift at all for music," spoke Leta, readily, turning her ingenuous and truthful face to them for a moment. "All that I know of it has had to be drilled into me."

"As Miss Carr had to drill it, at the time I speak of, into Charlotte Kage," murmured the lady. "Do sit down, Millicent, love. How is dear Mr. Canterbury?"

"He is quite well, thank you," answered Millicent. "Mr. Annesley is worse. Sarah is in—so much distress."

The pause was caused by the remembrance of something she had just heard at the Rectory against Mrs. Kage. Sarah Annesley had called her false and deceitful: and Millicent, sensitive and ever considerate to others, felt as guilty, face to face with Mrs. Kage, as though she had made the charge herself.

"Oh, poor old duck! we heard he was worse. But you know he is seventy-five, so his time has come, I suppose. Even parsons can't expect to live for ever. Can they, Thomas?"

"Why, no, Mrs. Kage; and none should know that more certainly than Mr. Annesley. By all I have heard of him—

of his good, humble, useful life—there can be few better prepared to welcome death than he."

Mrs. Kage threw her eyes across at the speaker—a shrewd look of curiosity in their depths.

"Where have *you* heard of old Annesley? Oh, I forgot—from his daughter."

"No, Mrs. Kage; I have been in the habit of hearing of Parson Annesley—it is what my good friend always calls him—long before I met his daughter last autumn. I speak of Mrs. Garston."

"Deaf old worry!" faintly aspirated Mrs. Kage. "I give you my word, Thomas, that the half-hours' visits I paid to that antediluvian old fossil at Little Bay upset my nerves for three days afterwards. Caroline knows it; Millicent Canterbury, my dear love, *you* know it. What ill fate sent her to the same identical seaside place that I chose, I am unable to imagine."

"Mrs. Garston came to Little Bay because my mother was there."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Kage, frigidly. "How Sarah Annesley could go to sit with her day after day, and survive it, was to me a marvel. Do unscrew this difficult stopper for me, Thomas; my fingers are unequal to it."

Holding out the bottle to him with those same fingers of affectation, Thomas Kage took out the stopper and returned it to her. She fluttered a few drops of its pungent essence on the carpet. And thus talking, and some three of them, at least, feeling as if that little parlour were Eden, twenty minutes wore away.

Millicent, not liking, in her self-consciousness, to stay longer, took her leave. Mr. Kage attended her to the door, and thence walked with her down the path to open the gate.

"The next time I come down, I hope to have the honour of calling on the Miss Canterburys," he said, as he shook her hand. "I feel ashamed not to do so now, but time will not permit it."

"You are going back to Aberton soon?"

"As soon as I have been to the Rectory. I am compelled to call there, short though my time is; for I promised Mrs. Garston to do so, and take her back news of Mr. Annesley."

"Will you give my kind regards to her?" spoke Millicent gently. "I think she is a very worthy old lady, in spite of her peculiarities."

"Yes, she is."

"And I should like to send my love to your mother," added Millicent, blushing a little.

"Thank you. Until my next visit, then."

"Perhaps you will never make another!" Leta stayed to say, her sweet face turned to him rather wistfully.

"Indeed I shall, and very shortly too. The business that has brought me down to Aberton now must bring me again soon, when I will try not to be so tied to time. Fare you well, dear Miss Canterbury!"

He lifted his hat, and Millicent walked away, carrying the piece of music, a whole flood-tide of sunshine making glad her beating heart.

CHAPTER III.

WITH LADY KAGE.

Apart from the crowd of lofty and pretentious houses sprung up of late years in the region that some one has called "Westburnia," stand two dwellings smaller and prettier, each in the midst of its garden, and almost under the very wing of that aristocratic place, Paradise Square. These two houses had not kept pace with others in grandeur. They had a plain, old, and staid look about them, answering no doubt to their respective occupants, who had been in them years before the fashionable squares and terraces around were built or thought of. In the one lived Mrs. Garston, in the other Lady Kage. They were held on long leases, and the rents were low. Doubtless the landlord was ready to eat his finger-ends with mortification, at seeing the rents exacted by others for houses not half as good as these in point of comfort and convenience. Mrs. Garston remained in hers from habit, from past associations. Her fortune brought her in nearly three thousand a-year, and the house was quite out of proportion with such an income as that;

but she would as soon have thought of changing her skin as her dwelling. She kept six servants indoors, and a large close carriage and a coachman in Paradise Mews. Several rooms had been built out at the back of her house at her own expense, otherwise some of the six servants might have wanted dormitories. It is not with Mrs. Garston, however, that we have to do just now, but with Lady Kage.

Her income has been already mentioned—a few hundreds a-year, all told—and it would die with her. Thomas Kage made a little, after his chamber and other expenses were paid; and he took it home and threw it into the common fund. They had kept two servants; but since Lady Kage grew worse another was taken on; and Dorothy attended solely to the comforts of her mistress.

Seven o'clock, London time, on a January evening, and two very charming concomitants for London streets—a thaw and a fog. Thomas Kage, arriving at home from that brief visit of his to Aberton, mentioned in the last chapter, thought it about one of the most disagreeable nights he had ever experienced as he sprang out of the hansom with his small black travelling-bag. Letting himself in with his latch-key, he turned into the dining-room, where he expected to find his mother. The empty chair, however—her own chair in the warmest corner—struck upon him with a kind of foreboding chill.

"Where's my mother?" he asked of a servant-maid who came running up.

"My lady is not quite so well, sir," was the answer. "She has not been down at all to-day. Dorothy thinks it's this nasty weather that's trying her. Oh, sir, and if you please," added the girl, as he was making his way to the staircase, "Mrs. Garston's footman has been here to ask you to be kind enough to step in as soon as you got back."

Lady Kage was in the small sitting-room above, cheerful with fire and two wax candles. A grey chenille shawl lay on the back of her easy-chair; a small cap of white lace shaded her delicate face, which grew bright at the entrance of her son —her good, noble, loving son—who had never in his whole life brought her one moment's pain. He kissed his mother fondly, and then sat down by her.

"And now what is this great matter, that my mother should be up here this evening?" he asked, in a light, almost a joking tone; for he knew how strangely impressionable to outer influences her spirits had been of late.

"My breathing has been so bad to-day, Thomas."

And as she spoke he became conscious that the breathing (not very free for a long time) was remarkably short. Thomas did not like this.

He drew a chair to the fire, railed a little at the fog, thick enough to affect anybody's breathing, and at what he called the slush, and then passed to the topic of his late visit, and the business that had induced it, of which Lady Kage was cognizant.

"Shall you be able to succeed in it, Thomas?"

"Yes. But I shall have to go down again, I expect, more than once."

"And Mrs. Kage is well?—And Caroline?'

"Mrs. Kage is blooming, and greater in essences and affectation than ever."

"Thomas!" spoke his mother, with a reproving smile.

"Well, it is not a libel."

"You saw Caroline?"

"I saw Millicent Canterbury also. She asked me to give her love to you."

"You ought to have called on the Canterburys, Thomas."

"If I had, I should not have been back to-day; and I did not care to leave you alone two nights, mother mine. I saw Mr. Canterbury at the parsonage, and said I would call the next time I went down."

Dorothy came in, grim as usual, to tell him his dinner was waiting downstairs. "It was nothing but mutton-chops and mashed potatoes," she added, for they had not been certain of his returning home. Thomas Kage went down as contentedly as he would have gone to a rich repast—he had been brought up to be thankful for all things—and then, mindful of Mrs. Garston's message, went into the next house.

Mrs. Garston was in her drawing-room: a tall, deaf old lady, with vigorous grey eyes, large features, and an irritable temper. Her dress, of rich white brocade silk, with a small

running pattern of bright flowers, stood out stiffly, and her headdress was of black velvet and pearls; all of a bygone fashion, like herself. She had heard from her servants of Mr. Kage's arrival home, and had sat bolt upright in her chair ever since, expecting him; her gold-headed stick, with which she supported her steps in walking, resting as usual against her. She took it in her hand when he entered, and began to tap the carpet; by which signs Thomas knew that she was not in a genial humour.

"So! You have come, have you? And taken your time over it."

It was rather by guess than ear that Thomas Kage caught the words. Mrs. Garston's eighty years had rendered her toothless; and she would no more have allowed the loss to be artificially supplied than she would have submitted to the wickedest thing invented by Satan. Putting aside any pain there might be in fixing them, she looked upon false teeth as one of the world's new and reprehensible sins.

He took her hand in his as he sat down close to her, his kindly, honest dark eyes looking pleasantly into her sharp ones of steel-grey. In his slow, impressive tones, heard by her distinctly, he explained that he had sat a little while with his mother, whom he had found worse, and stayed to take his dinner after his long journey, before coming in; and it disarmed her anger.

"Is anything fresh ailing your mother?"

"Her breath is laboured," spoke Thomas in her ear, "and she seems very low this evening. Dorothy thinks it may be the effect of the weather; I hope it is so."

Mrs. Garston gave a violent rap with her stick, which slightly incommoded Thomas Kage, for it struck his foot instead of the floor.

"What do fogs come for, I should like to know?"

"I think we should be puzzled to tell."

"They are horrible; they affect every one's breathing: you tell Lady Kage so from me. When I was out in the carriage to-day for my airing, driving round and round Paradise Square —for I wouldn't let the coachman venture farther in such an atmosphere—I was choked with damp and fog. Choked, I

assure you, Thomas. And, one with bad breathing would naturally feel it more than I did. Now, you tell your mother that; do you hear?"

"I'll be sure to tell her," said Thomas, who was used to Mrs. Garston.

"Don't let her get depressed through a mischievous fog. Depression is bad for us all, but it must be worse than poison to Lady Kage. I should not like to have heart-complaint myself, Thomas; though I can't help saying that what's called heart-complaint is generally nothing but what comes of nerves and fancy. Did you see Parson Annesley?"

Thomas Kage answered in the affirmative, and gave her his opinion of the clergyman's state. The old people had been friends in early life.

"And so you went to see those Kages!" commented the unceremonious dame, when she had gathered various items of news in answer to her questions. "*I* shouldn't. They are not worth it, Thomas."

"Not worth it, ma'am?"

"No, not worth it!" she repeated irascibly. "Why do you contradict? The mother's a lump of pretension and hypocrisy, and the daughter's a chip of the old block. Now, then!"

Thomas Kage only smiled in answer to her fierce look.

"They are not worthy to bear the same name as your mother; no, nor as you, Thomas, when you behave yourself. *I* knew the Gunses. What sort of a provision has Philip Annesley made for his daughter?"

"I do not know. I never heard anything about it."

Mrs. Garston groaned: she very much resented any check to her curiosity. Thomas Kage did not mend the feeling by inquiring if she had any news of Barnaby Dawkes.

"Now don't you bring up Barnaby Dawkes's name to me," shrieked the old lady, seizing her stick menacingly; "I won't stand it from you, Thomas Kage. He had the impudence to send me a letter to-day, saying he must quit the army and go through the Insolvent Court, unless I paid his debts. What do you think of that for a piece of brass?"

"Very wrong, of course," murmured Thomas. "But perhaps if he were once set straight, he would keep so."

"Is he anything to you, pray, that you should take his part?" she retorted. "Are you in league with Barby Dawkes?"

"Surely not. I scarcely know Captain Dawkes. I have not seen him more than three times in my life."

"And that's three times too often. You keep clear of him, Thomas Kage, or perhaps he may infect you with the propensity for getting into debt. He's a vain fop, that's what Barby Dawkes is, and lives in the billiard-room all his spare time. I don't like him; and I don't like Keziah. Debts last year, debts this year, debts next year; and then he comes to me to pay them for him! Why does he make them?"

She put the question so pointedly to Thomas Kage, with her keen gaze fixed on his face, that he could only make some kind of answer. He did not know why Captain Dawkes made them.

"Nor I," said Mrs. Garston. "But I'll tell you one thing, Thomas Kage, he will makes his debts once too often. There; you may enter that in your diary, if you will, to remind you later that I've said it."

Thomas Kage did not enter it in his diary, scarcely in his memory; but a time was to come when he would remember it with a shudder, for the prophecy was destined to be awfully fulfilled.

"What keeps Charlotte away from her mother?" resumed Mrs. Garston, in fierce tones. "Lady Kage told me yesterday she had not seen her for a week."

"Charlotte cannot come out just now; she is always ill, as you know, before her babies are born."

Mrs. Garston gave a resentful knock in the air at some imaginary object.

"Babies here, babies there, babies everywhere! How many will this next one make?"

"Nine."

"Nine!" repeated Mrs. Garston, lifting her hands. "Why do people have so many children? Where's the use of it?"

"I'm sure I can't tell," said Thomas, with a laugh. "I have none."

"And *don't* you have any," advised the old lady. "Don't you get married, my dear, for you are better off single. With such a mother as yours to come home to, and me next door to

talk to, you've everything you can reasonably want. Wives are a lottery at best, for I'll be whipped if the 'cutest men living can tell what they are till they've got 'em for better or worse. And children may turn out spendthrifts like Barnaby Dawkes."

"Which would not be desirable," thought Thomas Kage.

"Over and over again I warned Charlotte against that marriage," resumed Mrs. Garston. "I told her that where the exchequer was low, children generally arrived in shoals. She did not heed me, and what's the consequence? Don't you go and make a spectacle of yourself, Thomas. Barnaby Dawkes—— Who comes with such a noise as that, I should like to know?"

It was a summons at the front-door; a knock and ring so loud and startling as to have penetrated even to the deaf ears. The footman came in, looking a little scared as he spoke to Mr. Kage.

"One of your servants is come to say, sir, that her ladyship's taken worse—if you'd please to go in."

A parting pressure of the hand, and Thomas Kage was gone, long before his old friend in her impatient flurry comprehended a word.

Lady Kage was lying insensible, and medical aid was summoned. It was only a prolonged fainting-fit; but, ere the doctor departed, Thomas Kage had learnt the fatal news, that the end, in all probability, could not be retarded beyond many days. It almost overwhelmed him. He had known for some time now that the termination must be fatal, most likely sudden, but he had not expected it so soon. It is the ordinary case of life's experience. So soon! so soon! He sat by her with his aching heart; but for the strongest efforts at self-control, he must have given way to his emotion.

Lady Kage knew the truth almost as certainly as he, and did not fail to detect his inward agitation. She seemed quite comfortable again, and sat in her chair just as if nothing had happened, shunning bed as long as possible, for the feeling of suffocation was strong this evening, and always oppressed her more when she lay down. Thomas was standing in silence, his eyes fixed on the fire, when she put out her hand to him. He went up and clasped it.

"What has Dr. Tyndal been saying to you?" she asked, gazing up at his face with a wan smile, meant to be a cheery one.

The sudden question upset him. By the tone, the manner he saw she knew the worst. His chest heaved, his lips quivered, and he turned a little from her.

"Thomas!"

He flung both his hands on his face to hide its pain, and a sharp faint cry involuntarily escaped from him.

"Thomas, Thomas! My darling son! Do not grieve as though there were no hope."

She motioned that he should draw his chair closer and sit down, and their hands were locked together. It had not been hope for this life she spoke of, but for the next. The great love, always existing between them in heart, had been suppressed in manner; they had not been demonstrative the one with the other; this *cannot* be with those of a higher nature, where the feelings are sensitive, true, deep. But on this night, with the great parting brought suddenly close to hand, reserve was thrown aside, and they spoke "face to face," as though the reticence that pertains to earth had taken wings to itself and flown away. Then, if Thomas Kage had never known it before, he learnt how excellent a son she had ever found him, how truly she had appreciated his goodness, his sacrifices, his never-failing and most considerate love. A quarter-of-an-hour of deep agitation, and Thomas remembered that he must be calm, even to the end, for his mother's sake. His face had lines in it, his eyes were red, but he sat staring into the fire, her hand held quietly in his, while his heart felt as if it must burst with anguish.

"I have made my will, Thomas," she said, knowing that practical considerations must be spoken of as well as others. "There's not much to leave, my dear; still, I have been able to put by a little every year since Charlotte married, and you have paid your own expenses. It is about six or seven hundred pounds, I think—it will be that, I mean, when everything is paid; and—Thomas"—Lady Kage spoke hesitatingly and dropped her voice—"I have left it to Charlotte."

"Quite right—quite right," he warmly answered. "Charlotte wants it; I don't. I have my profession."

"That was what swayed me. I thought it over a long while, prayerfully, trustingly, and I seemed to see that poor Charlotte, with her flock of children and her many needs, had most right to it. But oh, my son, my good son! what can I leave to you?"

A great sob escaped him, and his eyelashes were wet as he turned them to her.

"Leave me your blessing, mother."

"You have it always; my heart blesses you every hour of its existence. And if I may be permitted to look down from there" (glancing upwards), "it will bless you still. Be at ease, my dear son: a better blessing than mine is yours—God's."

He suddenly knelt down by the fire and poked it violently—anything to carry off the emotion that was stirring him so terribly within. And then he threw his arm across his mother's lap, and hid his face upon it.

"Do not sorrow as those without hope," she whispered; "do not mourn as those who have no comforter. Where will be the profit of my daily patient teaching, Thomas, if you are to give way under this blow?"

"It is so sudden."

"Nay, you cannot have failed to know that death was coming."

"But not so soon—not so soon. Mother! I don't know how to bear it."

"You cannot think, Thomas, how quickly my life seems to have passed since that brief period of time into which all momentous events for me were crowded: my marriage, your birth, and your father's death. Looking back, it seems to be as yesterday. So—quickly—will your life pass; and then we shall be reunited where there can be no more parting."

She could feel the inward sobbing as he leaned against her. The tears gathered in her own eyes, and dropped on his head as she looked down at him.

"Heaven knows how I have striven to work on, patiently and silently, for the goal," she said. "In the midst of all my shortcomings and mistakes and sins, I have ever tried to keep the end in view, and to bear on for it. It has not been in vain," she softly whispered. "Oh, Thomas, I have been so

helped!—so helped! I do not presume to say, with St. Paul, that 'henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness,' but I dare to hope and say that I shall live amidst the redeemed in heaven. And the time of my departure is at hand."

If ever there had been a truly humble Christian in the world, it was Maria Kage. Thomas knew how sure all this was; but the bitter pain of parting filled his heart, and he could not find comfort. *That* would come later, when all should be over and the anguish in a degree gone by: but he did not see it now.

"I should like you to keep on the home and old Dorothy, Thomas," Lady Kage resumed, as he sat up in his chair again: "at least for a year. She will keep things straight for you; so that, in that respect, you will not miss me so much."

Even in the midst of his distress, the thought crossed him that he should be little likely to retain the home and Dorothy, for want of means; but he did not say so; he could not speak.

"I wish you would not grieve so."

"My grief is so bitter that I could almost wish to go with you. Oh, mother, say you forgive me for the pain I have caused you, wilfully or thoughtlessly; all moments of ingratitude; the want of love, that has been so poor compared with what it ought to have been!"

She took his hands, and bent down to him, a tender light in her earnest eyes.

"I forgive you for all, Thomas. I say it to satisfy you. But none can know better than you how little there is to forgive; I can recall nothing. You have been my dutiful, loving, thoughtful son; not to me only, but in the sight of heaven."

"Don't, mother!"

His tone was one of imploring anguish. In that moment, when she to whom he had been so closely knit was about to be taken from his sight for ever in this world, it seemed that he had not loved her and cherished her and worked for her half enough.

"God's ways and will are not as ours, Thomas, or I could have wished to live until I saw you more prosperous."

"Do not be anxious for me," was the hasty answer. "I have no fear of getting on."

"If I could be anxious for you, I should think my own life's lessons had been in vain. I leave you with entire trust; and be assured, Thomas, that you will get on just as much and just as little as God shall please."

He knew that.

"I have never once asked for riches for you, Thomas," she said in a deeper whisper; "I have been content to leave that to higher wisdom than mine. It is the other kind of riches I have besought for you—oh, very earnestly!—those that will serve you when the gold of this world shall have flown away."

A glow of sweet gladness, not lost immediately in the hour's sorrow, illumined his heart. He had full faith in the great belief that the child of a praying mother would never be lost.

"Do you remember the words of that verse in "Sintram," Thomas—the one you used to be so fond of?"

He knew which she meant, and nodded. They ran through his mind rapidly as she spoke.

"My Lord and God, I pray,
Turn from his heart away
This world's turmoil;
And call him to Thy light,
Be it through sorrow's night,
Through pain or toil."

"It is *that* that has been rather my chief prayer for you," she breathed. "Thomas, should it come—pain, toil, sorrow, whatever trouble may be deemed necessary for you—you will not fail; you will bear up bravely, looking to the end?"

"Yes," he clearly answered; "God helping me."

"It seems so little when you have passed through," she began again, after a long pause. "The cares, griefs, perplexities, distress, that appear so terrible to us at the time as hardly to be borne, seem as nothing looked back to when life is closing. Oh, Thomas, battle with the storm-waves as you best can; they must assail you sooner or later. Bear up manfully, never sinking, looking aloft always to the light that cannot fail. The waves that feel so cruel in breasting them, are only sent to carry you onwards. No cross, no crown."

"I know," he whispered; "yes."

"I shall be in heaven waiting for you; waiting until your appointed labour shall be done, and life's sun has set. Thomas, I had a dream this afternoon when I dropped asleep in the twilight, and I thought I was in a vast space of subdued, beautiful light, where all seemed to be rest and happiness. Crowds were moving about in white robes; a great river ran below; bright trees and lovely flowers clustered on either side of it. It was heaven, Thomas; it was heaven. I saw myself —*saw* myself from a distance, as it seemed—in white as the rest were, like an angel. I was looking down, watching for some one who was to come from afar, some one who was sure to come; for I saw the glad smile of welcome on my face. Thomas, I know that was you."

It was getting almost more than Thomas Kage could bear. He doubted also whether it was not for his mother, though she seemed so calm, with a glad, steady peace inward and outward.

"I know that dream was sent to comfort me, my son, to reconcile me to the parting. I am going to heaven. Just so shall I watch there in reality until you come to me. It will not be long; time passes so quickly."

"My darling mother, say no more to-night," he urged, putting his cheek against hers; "we will talk again to-morrow."

"I think I have said nearly all. You will step round to Charlotte's. Tell her that I am a little worse, and if she can possibly come to me in the morning, to do so. Read first."

"Do you care that I should read to-night?"

"I shall care for it to the end, Thomas."

Since Lady Kage's illness it had been his turn to read; but he verily believed he should break down to-night. To attempt more than a few verses he dared not. It was chance more than anything else that caused him to begin where he did.

"But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.

"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him."

And so on to the end of the chapter. After that, he closed the book.

"'Ever be with the Lord'!" repeated Lady Kage, in low tones; and she took his hands, and looked into his eyes with a great gladness while she said it.

"For ever and ever, please God!"

Nevertheless, it was a curious chance that caused Thomas Kage to choose those particular verses that night.

CHAPTER IV.

KEZIAH DAWKES.

In her square, comfortable, but rather small dining-room, with its thick purple Turkey carpet, and sideboard glittering with plate at her back, sat Mrs. Garston in her arm-chair, bolt upright. She wore the stiffest of black silks, and a head-gear of quilled white net and love-ribbon, being in mourning for her many-years' friend and neighbour, Lady Kage. By the position she sat in, rigidly perpendicular, those accustomed to her moods might have seen that something had put her out of humour. Though, indeed, so far as speech went, it was not very often she could have been said to be *in* it.

Opposite to her, on the other side the hearth-rug, was a plain young woman in fashionable attire. She had a grey, cold face, and wide-open green eyes, with brown spots in them. It was Miss Dawkes. The grandmother of Miss Dawkes and Mrs. Garston's husband had been brother and sister; so that the old lady stood to the younger in the affinity of great-aunt. And when aunts (or uncles either) possess a large fortune, with freedom to will it away at pleasure, their relatives to the nine-and-ninetieth degree do not fail to gather about them, like a flock of hungry ravens waiting for food.

To give Miss Dawkes her due, it must be confessed that not from any expectation of benefiting herself had she come forth to invade Mrs. Garston that winter day, genial in temperature as one of spring. Mrs. Garston did not like to be invaded by

Miss Dawkes. And Miss Dawkes knew it; for the ancient lady contrived to let her likes and dislikes be known without the smallest scruple. She had come to plead the cause of her brother, Captain Dawkes; to endeavour to conciliate Mrs. Garston's anger against him, and, if possible, get her to pay his debts.

To possess a kinsman from whom we have "expectations" is not always a good thing. No, not even when the money cannot fail to become ours in the due course of events. The fact sometimes works badly. It had in the case of Captain Dawkes. But for looking to Mrs. Garston's wealth, assuming that it must, or at least a large portion of it, inevitably descend to him, he might never have grown into the spendthrift that he now was. The clear-sighted old lady saw this; and perhaps that caused her to be more lenient to his faults than she would otherwise have been. There was little that she did not see; her vigorous intellect went deeply into things passing around her, and grasped their points unerringly.

"I wonder you have the face to come to me, Keziah! When I was your age, fifty years ago, I'd have hidden myself in a bag, head downwards, first. You want a year of thirty yet, you know. Manners are changed nowadays. Children are young women, and young women are bolder than old ones."

Keziah Dawkes murmured some deprecating reply in the lowest of tones. Mrs. Garston saw that words came from her lips, but she could not by any possibility have heard them. And Keziah intended this: nothing, as she knew, so aggravated the old lady as contradiction. It was rare indeed that Miss Dawkes did anything without a purpose: wary, cold, cautious, she weighed life's chances deliberately.

"If he has thrust one letter upon me, he has thrust half-a-dozen. The first came three weeks ago. I didn't answer it. I didn't answer any of 'em, and so he keeps on writing. What do you think of that for impudence?"

"Dear Aunt Garston, it is the fact of your not answering that has caused him to write again and again."

Had any sensitive stranger been present, he might have started at Miss Dawkes's voice. It sounded as a man's, and was very harsh. These voices are not pleasant to the ear; we

are apt to think that they carry their index with them. A soft and gentle voice has been called an excellent thing in woman: it is so in more senses of the word than the one generally understood, whether possessed by woman or by man.

Mrs. Garston seized her stick, and gave a vigorous thump on the floor.

"How many times have I paid Barby's debts? Answer me that."

But Miss Dawkes kept a wise silence.

"Twice over I have settled his whole catalogue of liabilities, and set him straight with the world; fifteen times at the least I have paid stray ones for him. What is the use of it, Keziah?"

It may be, that to this Miss Dawkes had no satisfactory answer to make. A faint red, dark and dusky, tinged her cheeks.

"The oftener I pay, the oftener I may pay; and where, I ask, is it to end? It is doing him no good, Keziah. You see that for yourself, you know, and yet you come pestering me. If he were put straight to-morrow, the next day he would begin to pile up debts again. The best thing for Barby, the kindest thing, will be to do no more for him. If once I say I won't, I *won't!* Mark you that."

"But you will not say it, dear Aunt Garston; you will not in justice say it!" And Miss Dawkes in her eagerness rose and crossed the hearth-rug, her petitioning hands held out.

"Keep your seat, if you please, Keziah."

"I—I thought perhaps you would hear me better if I sat nearer to you, Aunt Garston."

"I hear you quite well enough. You want me to pay Barby's debts: there's no fear I shouldn't hear that. And I say, Keziah Dawkes, you are bold to ask it. What do you mean by 'justice'? I heard that, you see."

"He has been taught to consider himself your heir, Aunt Garston."

"My bear!"

"Heir. I said heir."

"Has he? Who taught him?"

"Every one. My father and mother, whilst they lived."

"A man called yesterday, Keziah Dawkes, saying he wished to see me on business, and was shown in—here, to this very dining-room. He asked for a five-guinea subscription for some improvements they want to set afloat in the garden of Paradise Square. When I told him I wouldn't give five shillings, let alone five guineas. that the Paradise-garden improvements were nothing to me, he began to resent it, saying the committee had *counted* upon my help because I was rich, and they had put my name down for the amount. Do you consider I was responsible for that, Keziah?"

"Acquainted with your well-known benevolence, they——"

"I ask you if you think I was responsible for what the committee chose to do without my knowledge?" shrieked Mrs. Garston, rapping violently.

"No. Certainly not."

"Very well. It is a case in point. I was not responsible for what your folks did when they taught Barnaby Dawkes to think himself my heir."

"My father, had he lived, would have been your heir."

"What?" asked Mrs. Garston, bending her deaf ear.

"I spoke of papa, Aunt Garston. He was to have been your heir, had he survived you."

"That's as it might have been. He would have come in for a share. But you may remember one fact, Keziah—your father would not have made ducks and drakes of it."

Keziah knew that. Her father's temperament had been cold, cautious, self-denying, as was her own.

"Your father's mother was my husband's sister; but the money I enjoy comes from my side, not his; it is my own. Therefore, your family have no *right* to it, Keziah. We were friendly with your father, and I should not have forgotten him substantially in my will. But to say that Barby has any claim to consider himself my heir, is a fallacy. Do you hear?—a fallacy."

"If Barnaby cannot be helped, he must go through the Insolvent Court," spoke Miss Dawkes.

"And a good thing for him. It would take down his consequence a notch or two."

"But think of the disgrace to the name, Aunt Garston."

"It wouldn't be my name," returned the shrewd old lady. "His own and yours; but not mine."

Miss Dawkes began to think that she should be worsted in the argument. Mrs. Garston, searching her with her keen steel eyes, saw it.

"There is no earthly thing you care for in this mortal world, Keziah, except that brother of yours; apart from him, you hold no interest in it. There's only three years' difference in your ages, for he'll be six-and-twenty next month; but you seem to regard him with the indulgent love of a mother rather than of a sister. Does it do him good?"

"It does not do him harm."

"I say it does do him harm. You don't see his faults; and that encourages him in his reckless folly. Whether you can't see them, or whether you wink at them, I don't pretend to judge; the result is the same: most likely it's something of both. He goes on spending, and you go on winking."

"His means are so very shallow, Aunt Garston; the merest trifle, except his pay."

"I know his brains are shallow. You need not tell me."

"His means, I said: his income. How can he keep straight upon it?"

"How does Thomas Kage, next door, keep straight upon a tithe of it?" demanded Mrs. Garston, growing fierce. "Why, because he knows that he *must*. Don't attempt to play the sophist with me, Keziah Dawkes; it will not answer. If Barnaby had not me and my purse to turn to, he would live within his income."

Miss Dawkes, in her private opinion, thought that was likely. At the same time, she deemed it most unreasonable and unjust for Barnaby to be expected to live within it, considering that Mrs. Garston and her purse were there. The old lady held up the forefinger of her right hand, glittering with diamonds of the first water.

"Listen to me, Keziah. I have no wish to see Barnaby go to the dogs. He is a kinsman, and I'd rather he turned out respectably. The tack he is on is the *wrong* tack; and neither you nor I can see where it will lead him to. Let him change it; he is young enough to do so yet. But if it is persevered in

ill thirty's turned, the chances are that his spendthrift habits vill so have mastered him that he must indulge them at any ost. Tell him this; impress it upon his mind: *let him get ut of them while he may.* Heaven alone knows what the cost night be."

Could there have been a prevision in Mrs. Garston's mind s she said this? It really seemed, as things were to turn out n the future, that it was so; that she saw, as in a mirror, the hain of coming events.

Miss Dawkes saw something quite different, which she ooked upon as prophetic: that by the time Barnaby was hirty years of age, the old lady before her would have ceased o count years, and he be in the full enjoyment of her large ortune. In spite of these restive interludes on the part of Irs. Garston, neither she nor her brother entertained much loubt that the money would come to him. The only doubt ttaching to the matter was, how he should carry on until then.

"For this once, dear Aunt Garston! You will help him this nce? He is almost afraid to be seen in the streets, lest he hould get arrested."

"Dissected! Who is going to dissect him?"

"Arrested. Arrested, and put into prison."

"Prison, eh? The safest place for him. A month or two f it might bring him to his senses."

"And ruin him with his regiment. For this once, dear unt, in mercy!"

"I will not listen to any more, Keziah. What you say can nake no difference one way or the other, and you had better ot put me out of humour. If I pay his debts, I pay them; if I on't, I don't: and there's an end of it. You can stay the day ith me if you like, and go upstairs and take your bonnet off."

Miss Dawkes, knowing the old lady's mood, looked upon his speech altogether as a kind of concession, and was too ise to mar it. She slowly untied her bonnet-strings, and rose.

"I saw Mrs. Annesley at the window as I came by, aunt, nd went in for a minute. She says it is feared that Mr. Dunn dying."

"Which of them?"

"The member, Herbert."

Mrs. Garston bent her ear.

"Richard Dunn was here three nights ago, with a shocking bad cold. I hope it's not him."

"It is Herbert, aunt—the one who married Miss Lydia Canterbury."

"And a fine tossed-off, bold-speaking thing *she* is!" pronounced Mrs. Garston, rapping violently. "Herbert Dunn brought her here to call after they were married; and, before she had well got out of the house again, she called me a scarecrow. A deaf old scarecrow! I heard of it; and I told Dicky of it, that he might let his brother know. I'm sorry for Herbert, but I've not encouraged his wife here. What's the matter with him?"

"He has been ill since before Christmas, Mrs. Annesley says—seriously so. But danger was not thought of."

"And who says there's danger now?"

"There's great danger, aunt. He was taken worse in the night, and Dr. Tyndal was called up. The doctor has desired that his relatives may be summoned; he thinks he is dying."

"Dying, dying!" angrily repeated Mrs. Garston, as if the word offended her. "One dying on this side, another born on that! I wonder what the world's coming to! Charlotte Lowther's baby arrived this morning; and that makes her ninth."

"Charlotte Lowther?" repeated Miss Dawkes, not remembering the name. "Who is Charlotte Lowther, aunt?"

"Who is Charlotte Lowther? Why, Thomas Kage's sister: poor Lady Kage's step-daughter, that she brought up like her own, and sacrificed herself to. You never know any one, Keziah. Ring the bell."

"We have not had any acquaintance with the Kages, you know, aunt."

"It was your loss, not theirs. Barby might take a lesson from Thomas Kage. As to Charlotte, she *would* marry Bob Lowther, and she has her troubles through it. The man is a good husband, I believe; but I question if he makes more than six or seven hundred a-year, and every one knows how far that goes in London."

"I remember now. He is a civil engineer."

"He is as civil as you, at any rate," retorted Mrs. Garston. Robert Lowther's a favourite of mine."

"I did not say he was uncivil, aunt."

"Oh, didn't you, though! I know your sneering ways, ziah. There's no one in the world good enough to tie rby's shoe. You'd like to tell me so to my face. Ring that l again."

The entrance of the servant prevented the necessity. Mrs. rston wanted her carriage round without delay. The man a little surprised at receiving the order, for it was earlier n she usually went out, but retired to transmit it.

"I am going round to Paradise Square," she explained to grand-niece. "Herbert Dunn's wife is not a courteous man, but that's no reason why I should not inquire after n. I shall come back to luncheon; and if you like to take airing with me afterwards, Keziah, you can."

The carriage, a very handsome equipage, with a pair of fine ite horses, came to the gate; and Mrs. Garston, in her ck bonnet and black-silk cloak, stepped into it, and was ven away.

Warm sunshine lay on the pavements; London, for once, ked bright; some sparrows were gaily twittering beneath roofs, in the delusive belief that the biting frosts of winter l flown away never to return.

Keziah unceremoniously drew Mrs. Garston's arm-chair in nt of the fire, and put her feet on the fender. That things uld go on all right, she entertained no doubt; to fear so at a catastrophe as that they would *not*, never seriously ered her thoughts; only, Barby would have to be cautious w he played his cards. In the main, Keziah wished her ther would be more careful in many things than he was at sent given to be.

"The old woman is right, after all," soliloquized she. Barby only gets his debts settled that he may be at liberty to ntract more. If he had *not* her fortune in perspective, it ght be a bad look-out, unless he ceased spending; but he it; she could not for shame leave it away from him, ther would she. He is the only representative of the nily, and——"

"Captain Dawkes, ma'am."

The only male representative of the family came forward at the servant's announcement. To be correct, however, it should be stated that it was the Dawkes family alluded to, not the Garston.

Captain Dawkes was a handsome man—very handsome in his regimentals; not that he wore them to-day. His figure was fine, his features were good, with quite a carmine flush on the cheeks that his black and shining whiskers adorned. On his horse he looked more than well; seen close, as Keziah saw him now, he was less so; for the very dark eyes were too near each other, and the expression of the face was not open—defects which half the world would never detect; and Keziah made one amongst them. Blinded by partiality, she verily believed that had he taken his place amid the gods and goddesses on Mount Olympus, the rest would have knelt and done homage to his beauty.

"Barby, is it you? Why did you come?"

"To see the grand-aunt. Is the ancient party visible?"

"She will think it a conspiracy, Barby. I here first, and you next; both of us in one day. Why did you not tell me you were coming here?"

"I may as well say, 'Why did you not tell me you were?'" returned Captain Dawkes. "And with more reason, Keziah; for you generally inform me of your probable movements for the day, and I don't often know mine."

Keziah was silent. She had intended this visit of persuasion to be kept secret from Barnaby. For his sake she would have gone to the end of the world barefoot, and thought it no sacrifice. All she could do now was to tell him of the unpropitious mood the ancient lady was betraying, and leave it to his own judgment whether he would remain to see her or not.

"The fact is, Keziah, things have come to a tolerable crisis," observed Captain Dawkes, after listening. "The sharks are after me. If it were not for the confounded mess that might come of it, I'd let myself fall into their clutches, and get locked up for a day and a night. That would bring her to her senses."

"I doubt if it would, in the sense you mean. She has been

ing the best place for you would be a prison; that it would ng *you* to your senses. What are you looking at, Barby?"

Securely sheltered by the window-curtain from outside obser-ion, Captain Dawkes had been peering up the road and wn the road to satisfy himself that it was clear.

Keziah a little changed colour.

"Surely you do not fear that you have been followed here!"

"Not much. It is all right, I see. Been saying a prison is best place for me, has she? Considerate old octogenarian! t that's only her temper, Keziah. When women get to her e, they say anything. It is so unreasonable!"

"What is?"

"To live so long. In the ordinary course of events I ought have come into my inheritance ten years ago."

Keziah did not say that Mrs. Garston had just hinted that inheritance might be none of his, that he had no legal right claim to it. She spared him when she could; telling him disagreeable news only what could not be avoided.

"How long do you expect her to be away, Keziah? If I ought it might be better not to see her, why, I'd decamp, and me in to-morrow. She—— Halloa! That's Kage, I think. want to ask him a question."

Seizing his hat, Captain Dawkes ran down the garden—for ese two houses were built back from the road, not like the odern ones. Thomas Kage was passing on to his own, when found himself called, and turned to see Barnaby Dawkes. e captain met him with outstretched hand.

"I was awfully sorry, old fellow, to hear of your loss," he gan, the deep mourning attire reminding him of it. "Forgive laying hold of you in this manner. You know Briscoe, n't you?"

"Sam Briscoe? Yes."

"Can you give me his address?"

Mr. Kage hesitated, and then told the truth in his straight-ward manner.

"I am not at liberty to give it. Briscoe is in some difficulty, u know."

"He's not in half as much difficulty as I am. Come, let's ve it, Kage."

"I cannot, Captain Dawkes. It was by the merest accident that I became acquainted with his present address. He said he must trust to my good-feeling and honour not to disclose it to any man living, though it were his own brother."

"Does Briscoe owe you money?"

"No."

"Well, he does me. It's not much, but upon my word I am so hard up that the smallest sums are of moment. If Briscoe can pay me, I know he will. I don't want to bother him."

"Give me a letter for him. I'll forward it at once."

"Very well; I'll write it now and send it in to you. But for this cross-grained old grand-aunt of mine turning crusty, I should not need to trouble anybody. It may be a month yet before she comes to; and that will about land me in the Thames."

"The Thames!"

"If I don't get money from somewhere, I must either hang or drown myself. Good day."

Captain Dawkes turned in with a look as gloomy as his tone, and Thomas Kage passed on to his home.

Never did he now put the latch-key in the lock and enter, but a feeling of desolation shot across his heart, as if the world and the house were alike steeped in gloom that admitted of no lightening. However he might temporarily forget his loss abroad, amidst the absorbing cares of the day's business, the moment he approached his home it returned to his mind with redoubled force.

It was a curious coincidence that he should have chosen those particular words in the Bible to read to his mother that past night—as already recorded—for they were the last he ever read to her. Lady Kage died that night. When Thomas came back from carrying the news of her illness to Mrs. Lowther, Lady Kage was in bed, and seemed quite comfortable. She smiled when he bent over her, saying she felt so easy and happy, just as if she should be quite well in the morning. Thomas kissed her, and said he hoped she would be.

He sat up in her room. He was not easy, and could not leave her. Dorothy resented it. *She* had always sat up with

er lady before; things had come to a pretty pass if Mr. homas must take her duties on himself. Thomas quietly plied that Dorothy might sit up too, and keep him company she pleased. Dorothy did not please, and betook herself to adjoining room in dudgeon.

Lady Kage dropped into a quiet sleep. He sat in the arm-air, and kept the chamber in stillness, dropping solitary bits coal on the fire with his noiseless hand. He thought that night of undisturbed rest might go far to refresh and strengthen er. And the night wore on, and the small hours of the morning ruck.

Lady Kage died in her sleep; so peacefully, so calmly, that er faithful son, watching by her side, knew not that the spirit ad passed away.

Three weeks had elapsed since then. Only three weeks! nd yet it seemed to Thomas Kage, in his grief, that it was early half a lifetime.

Closing the hall-door, he turned into the room where they ad so often sat together—the dining-room. There was no ne to give him a smile of welcome now. The arm-chair stood ere as of yore, but it was vacant; vacant for ever.

Dorothy came in, looking rather more grim than usual in ack, to know if he wanted anything. He was left sole executor his mother, and business connected with the various arrange-ents had occasionally brought him home in the middle of the ay. No, he wanted nothing.

"Mrs. Lowther's going on well; and the boy's as fine a boy need be; I've been round to see," cried Dorothy, who ways seemed to speak as if she were at variance with the orld and the listener.

"I know," said Thomas. "I called there this morning."

"And I've took in the news to Mrs. Garston, sir."

"All right, Dorothy."

Dorothy shut the door with a sharp click. And her master, pening a secretaire, began to examine some papers in it. His ountenance was pale to-day; looking like that of a man who ad some special grief upon him. Grief it was, in truth; he ad so tenderly loved his mother. But no remorse was mingled ith it. Well would it be for us all had we performed our

duties lovingly and faithfully to those gone on before, as had Thomas Kage! There would be less bitter regret in the world.

Lady Kage had expressed a wish to her son that he should continue to occupy the house for twelve months; and for this she had provided in her will; paying the rent for that time, paying also Dorothy's wages. The greater portion of the furniture, he found, was left to him; a little of it only going to Charlotte. Matters in the household were already reorganized. One of the maids was discharged; the other remained with Dorothy; and Thomas Kage was sole master.

The future presented itself to his view in an indistinct form. Whether he should rise rapidly in his profession, or earn only bread-and-cheese at it for years and years, as but too many do, he knew not. It was a lottery at best. On very rare occasions, he would see, as in a glimpse, a vision of success: the old house renovated, ease prevailing, and a sweet form sitting beside the chair that had been his mother's. Its realization was so very improbable, that he wondered whether he was becoming foolish for anticipating such a thing. Nevertheless, it caused his heart to beat and his cheek to glow.

Meanwhile, a hitch occurred in the business that had taken him to Aberton, and he began to doubt whether there would be any necessity to go down again. In which case he should have no plea for a second visit to Chilling.

CHAPTER V.

CALLED UP BY TELEGRAM.

The village of Chilling was a small village, scarcely to be called one. It was retired, primitive, and very beautiful. There was a green, on which the stocks stood, unused now, and a bare common with a pond in the corner. The high-road wound past both green and common, with its handful of cottagers' dwellings on the other side of it. It went winding up by the entrance-gates of the Rock, leaving the grey church to the right, which stood midway between the Rock and the

illage. Church and parsonage were built of stone; but whereas the former remained rugged and time-worn, the latter had undergone renovation and improvement, so as to be, to all intents and purposes, a modern dwelling-place. Some few mansions were scattered about—gentlemen's seats—but none of them could boast of half the magnitude and beauty of Mr. Canterbury's—the Rock. Whence it derived its name—suggestive of bleak cliffs and barren heights—none now living could tell. Certainly neither rocks nor barrenness were near it; but, instead, all that can be imagined of sunny plains and rich foliage, and scenery that had scarce its fellow in the land.

Passing the quaint old lodge at the entrance-gates, the open park was gained, soft as moss to the feet, white in the season with its chestnut blossoms. The trees were very fine; the deer liked to rub their antlers against them; the young ladies, George Canterbury's daughters, used, when children, to sport under their shade. There, on its gentle eminence, close by as it were, for the park was small, rose the Rock, with its beautiful parterres of many-coloured flowers, its white terraces, and its nine broad entrance-steps.

A castle once stood there, on the very selfsame spot. Nearly all trace of it, save its legends, had long since passed away; but that it must have been of great repute and beauty in its time, the records showed. George Canterbury, into whose hands they had come when he purchased the Rock, kept them as heirlooms.

The house faced the west, the terraces and the gay flowers alone intervening between it and the park. On the northern side the grounds were also comparatively open, and laid out with exceeding taste; on the southern side there was a very wilderness of shrubs and trees, extending quite to the boundary-wall, wonderfully refreshing to the sight on a day of burning heat, and a grateful shelter from the afternoon sun.

In the midst of this wilderness stood an old well or fountain, once sparkling with water perhaps, but dry now. Shrubs, withered and stunted and dark with age, green and beautiful in their long-past prime, clustered round the brink in a tangled mass. It bore the name of the Lady's Well; and the history attaching to it, whether fabled or real, was one of painful

interest. The well has nothing whatever to do with modern times, or with this modern story, so its legend shall be omitted altogether. George Canterbury, who held possession of it amidst other records, refreshed his memory with a perusal of it from time to time. He felt a sort of pride in the accidental fact that his own son had borne the same name—Edgar—as the renowned Crusader-knight, Edgar de Chilling. Strong-minded Lydia Canterbury, the third daughter, who was of a hard, practical turn of mind, without an ounce of sentiment to leaven it, was wont to say her father's brain was so full of the knight and the old family, that he had grown, she verily believed, to think he was descended from them. But Miss Lydia was rather outspoken. You have heard Mrs. Garston, seeing her after her marriage and for the first time, pronounce her a "tossed-off, bold-speaking thing;" and all because the young lady, in her random way, had called her a "scarecrow."

The Lady's Well had a fame of its own, apart from its romance and its legend. Superstition was rife there, as it is in many places to which curious stories attach. A lady's ghost was said to haunt it on windy nights; and very few of the Rock's female retainers would have cared to promenade on that side the house after dark, or perhaps in daylight either. Whether from this cause or not, certain it was that this part of the grounds was almost entirely unfrequented. The gardeners kept the clustering shrubs and trees in passable order, and there the culture ended. For one thing, no one had need to come on this southern side; the state-entrance lay in front, the household entrance at the back. On the northern side, glass doors opened to the beautiful lawn, and were very generally used by the family. A tale went abroad that, in certain conditions of the atmosphere, a reflection of a grand old castle might be seen in the sky, above the Rock, something after the fashion of a mirage. Some shepherds, tending their flocks on the far-away Welsh hills, professed to have seen this; and forthwith it was assumed to be a picture of the once-famous castle, called in its day the Castle of Chillingwater. Altogether, what with the present beauty of the place, the ancient histories of the castle whose site it covered, and the still-existing well and its superstition, the Rock had become the show-place of

the county; and it was quite a common thing for strangers sojourning in the neighbourhood to beg permission to go over it; which Mr. Canterbury was rather proud than otherwise to accord. Thus it may be perceived that the Rock was one of those fine and desirable mansions that the world talks of and writes about.

It was of more importance than its owner, George Canterbury; for Mr. Canterbury, in point of descent, was a very small personage indeed. He and his father—but chiefly his father—had made their immense fortune in mining speculations; and George Canterbury was a young man when he withdrew altogether from business, and purchased the Rock. People, making a random guess, said he was worth a million of money. He was certainly worth a great deal, but nothing like so much as that.

Wealthy and luxurious though the Rock was, it had not been able to keep out our last enemy. Death had gone within George Canterbury's portals, and never said, With your leave, or By your leave. Mrs. Canterbury was the first to die. Miss Canterbury was then in her twentieth year, and she had at once assumed her post as the household's most efficient mistress. Several years subsequently, Edgar, the only son, was taken. The young man, after he came to years of discretion, was neither steady nor sedate: certain odds and ends of conduct had come out now and again, and penetrated to the ears of the family, causing concern to his sisters, bringing down reprobation from his father. But when his almost sudden death took place, it was to all of them a bitter and lasting grief. His faults were forgotten: they were, in fact, but those that too commonly attach to young men, and in one of less exalted station would never have been talked about. His virtues remained. Edgar Canterbury had the making of a fine man in him, and would have turned out well yet, had his life been spared. He lay ill little more than a week, in his rooms in the south wing; and then died. All their care, all their prayers, all the medical aid brought together from far and near, did not avail to save him. From two to three years had elapsed now; and they had gone out of mourning for him: but the south rooms remained untenanted, almost sacred; and

Edgar's things were in their accustomed places, just as though he inhabited them still.

Miss Canterbury was now regarded as the heiress to the Rock. That she would succeed to it just as surely as though it were entailed upon her, none doubted. It was well known that in the first weeks succeeding Edgar's death Mr. Norris, the family solicitor, had been summoned to the Rock by its master, to make a fresh will. It was legally executed; and Mr. Canterbury informed his daughter that he had put her in Edgar's place; and he delivered to her sundry injunctions, charges, wishes, in regard to the property, when he should be no more. None of the property was entailed. In all respects Miss Canterbury was well fitted to succeed her father; gossips said she would make a more liberal mistress than he had been a master. It was certain that Miss Canterbury would never marry—at least, as certain as such contingencies ever can be. She had been on the point of marriage once to Harry Lynn-Garston, the eldest son of Mr. Lynn-Garston. Very painful circumstances parted them, and I only wish I had space to relate the history. They were parted, and Harry Lynn-Garston's death followed rather soon upon it. Miss Canterbury said nothing to the world; whatever of grief and remorse she might feel—for the parting was her doing, not his—she buried it within her in silence. She had loved him deeply, enduringly, ardently, and never more so than when she gave him his dismissal. Love and haughty pride had had a struggle together in her spirit; the latter conquered, and he went back to India a rejected man. But when the news came of Captain Lynn-Garston's death in battle, Miss Canterbury knew that the sunshine of her existence had gone out for ever. She made no sign. For all people saw, she was tranquilly indifferent; but later, when her father would have urged upon her the acceptance of another offer, she quietly told him she should live and die Olive Canterbury. And she was not one to break her resolution, in that matter or in any other.

After Mrs. Canterbury's death, there had been a stir in the county. Every mother for miles round who had daughters waiting to be married, ordered horses to her carriage, and set off to condole with George Canterbury. What though he had

a flock of children—four daughters and a son—was not the Rock as a mansion of refuge, if by chance it might be attained to? Were not the riches, real and fabulous, as lumps of delight, making hearts beat and mouths water? Even so. George Canterbury had to run the gauntlet his widowed state brought upon him, just as other widowers with great possessions are running it at this very hour. He came out unscathed, uncaught. It might have been that the palpable nature of the overtures put him on his guard. Something or other rendered him mail-proof; and as the years and years went on, and nothing came of them, the hopes died away as fruitless, and Mr. Canterbury was left in peace.

So the Rock was to be the inheritance of Olive Canterbury; and it was surmised, by those likely to know best, that the fortunes of the three younger daughters would be about a hundred thousand pounds each. They might well be called heiresses! Lydia had married Herbert Dunn, member for the county. He was a good deal older than herself. Mr. Canterbury had settled a thousand a-year upon her; but the greater portion of her fortune would not be hers until his death. They had no children, and Mr. Dunn had latterly been in ill-health.

The snow had dispersed; the country wore a warmer aspect, for the sun shone brightly. It was early in the year, and those who were weatherwise said winter would come back again. In the breakfast-room at the Rock, the white cloth lighted up with its glittering silver and service of Worcester china, stood the two elder Miss Canterburys—Olive and Jane. Olive was turned thirty now—a tall, stately, handsome woman, with a face of power, but good and genial. Her fine hair was of a purple blackness, her features were pale and clearly cut, her eyes were dark grey. They had some trouble in their depths this morning. Her gleaming silk swept the ground, as she stood with a folded paper in her hand. Olive Canterbury was never seen in merinos or cottons. Jane, the next sister, was fairer and quieter-looking, betraying little of Olive's decision of mind and manner.

The Rock seemed to live so entirely within itself, possessing few interests without, and no business, that the arrival of a telegram was a startling event. One had been just delivered,

addressed to Mr. Canterbury. Olive bent her brow a little, Jane turned pale. Neel the butler, who had brought it in, waited for orders.

"It had better go up to papa at once, Neel. Is he getting up, do you know?"

"Yes, ma'am. The shaving-water went in some time ago."

"Take this up, then."

Neel went out with the formidable missive. Millicent, coming in at the time, saw it in his hand.

"What is that, Olive?" she asked, after wishing her sisters good morning.

"A telegraphic despatch."

"A telegraphic despatch!" repeated Millicent, in alarmed tones. "Oh, Olive! What can it be? Who is it from?"

"Millicent, child, don't put yourself out; that can do no good."

"What are you fearing, Olive?"

"That something is wrong with Lydia or her husband. I know of no one else likely to telegraph"

"If Lydia—— Hark!"

Mr. Canterbury's dressing-room bell was ringing loudly. Neel, coming down from delivering the despatch to his master, hastened back again.

"Breakfast instantly!" was the order. "Tell Miss Canterbury."

The telegram was from Mrs. Dunn. Her husband was alarmingly worse, it was feared dying, and Mr. Canterbury was prayed to hasten to London.

Mr. Canterbury was one of those who can only lose their heads on such an occasion. Olive would have been as tranquil as the day. Everything necessary to be done could have been done for him. His servants would have packed his clothes. He had but to say, "I am going to London," and take his breakfast in peace, and step into his carriage to be conveyed leisurely to the station at Aberton. Not so. Mr. Canterbury was in as much commotion as though his own life depended on his departure, or as if the business of the world had been suddenly thrown upon his shoulders. He could not take his breakfast sitting. Every moment he rose up from it—now

looking from the window, now dodging to the fire, now calling out, "I shall want this put into my portmanteau," or "I shall not want that." To be summoned out in this haste had never occurred to him before in his tranquil life, so there might be some excuse for him.

"Dear papa, it will be all right," spoke Olive; "there is not the slightest necessity for this. The first train you can go by is the ten o'clock."

"Dear me! I'm sure I shall not get there. I know I shall forget everything I ought to take. Had there been time, I should have liked to ask whether I could take up any message for the parsonage. Their relations, the London Annesleys, live close to Lydia."

"I will go to the parsonage and inquire, papa," said Millicent, starting up. "I'll bring you back word."

"You have not finished breakfast."

"Indeed I have. While you've been fidgeting, papa, I've been eating. There's plenty and plenty of time."

In two minutes Millicent was out of the house. The church was not far off; a quarter-of-a-mile or so: the schools were on that side of it, the parsonage was on this. It was a low, broad house, sheltered by trees, with a portico-entrance, and a level lawn, surrounded by sweet-scented flowers. Woodbine, wild-roses, clematis, jasmine, clustered round the porch in summer, and spread to the lower windows on either side.

The Reverend Philip Annesley, Rector of Chilling for the past five-and-thirty years, was old now and fading fast. He had christened all George Canterbury's children, and they looked up to him as a second father. It was a breakdown altogether, rather than any specific malady. Sarah Annesley, his considerate, dutiful, and most loving daughter, bitterly regretted having left him for so many weeks the previous autumn, to accompany Mrs. Kage to the seaside. There lay on her mind a lively resentment against that lady for having taken her, which was perhaps a little unjust.

Entering on her hasty errand, Millicent found Miss Annesley in trouble. Her father was palpably weaker that morning than he had been at all—quite unable to get up. For the first time, the doctor had not ventured to speak of hope. Millicent, con-

cerned at the news, did not at once mention the cause of her early visit.

"I thought until to-day he might rally and get about again," said Sarah, as they stood side by side on the hearth-rug, the firelight betraying the tears resting in her eyes; "but I do fear now there is not much hope of it. And oh, how I blame myself!"

"For what?" asked Millicent, in surprise. If ever there had been a daughter anxious to fulfil unselfishly every duty in life, it had surely been Sarah Annesley.

"For having left him alone in the autumn. You know I spoke of this to you once before, Millicent. The regret grows upon me; it lies with a heavy weight to-day. Six weeks! six weeks, Millicent!—and he seventy-five. I shall never forgive myself for my thoughtlessness. It seems to me at odd moments as if I could not be forgiven by Heaven."

"But he was so well at that time."

"I know it. So well, that I was lulled into a false security. I did think I ought not to leave him; and when Mrs. Kage first proposed that I should accompany her, I said decisively that I could not leave my father. What did she do? She came here one afternoon when I had gone out with Caroline, and talked papa into the belief that I required change and sea-air. I think she *alarmed* him about me, saying I looked pale and fagged; I do, indeed, Millicent. Papa made all arrangements at once, without waiting to consult me, and I was weak enough and wicked enough, after a faint opposition, to fall in with them."

"And so would any one else, Sarah."

"When I came home, at the end of the six weeks, and saw the alteration in papa, my heart sank within me. Of course, the chief fault was mine; but I do feel afraid that I have hated Mrs. Kage ever since."

"Oh, Sarah! It was so kind of her to take charge of us."

"I don't think it was done in kindness," avowed Sarah, speaking freely in her honest indignation. "I think she only proposed we should go that *she* might be able to go also. The sum she named to papa as my share of the expenses was not very large; but she brought back an account which was so,

Millicent, she had a larger one from Mr. Canterbury; and I know the two must have paid the whole cost of the expedition, so that she and Caroline went free of all cost."

A flush shone in Millicent's face at the possibility of the truth. She—simple, honest, guileless—could not quite believe it. Sarah had said somewhat of this before, but not so fully.

"The regret lies upon me with painful bitterness," resumed Miss Annesley. "I cannot sleep; and if I do get to sleep, I wake up again with a start. Never before did I know what remorse was."

"Don't you think that your sorrow for Mr. Annesley is causing you to take an exaggerated view of this?" Millicent ventured to ask.

"No. But for my leaving him all that time, I do not think his health would have failed so soon," Sarah continued in low tones of emotion, as she pressed her face down on the cold white-marble mantel-piece to hide its anguish. "He had more work to do in the parish, mine and his own; he had no one to help him in the visiting; he took all the duty on the three Sundays when Mr. Lowe was ill; and he finished up by catching a terrible cold, which he could not stay indoors to nurse. Altogether, it told upon him, Millicent, and he broke down earlier than he would have done."

"I cannot stay, Sarah," Millicent said, as she proceeded to tell of Mr. Canterbury's summons to London, and inquire if he could do anything.

"Thank you, no. Should he see Mrs. Annesley, he can explain to her how ill papa is. We have never had much acquaintance with the London Annesleys, Millicent. I fancy she is a very cold woman. I hope your papa will find Mr. Dunn better. I wonder Lydia did not send for Miss Canterbury or Jane."

"You must have forgotten Lydia to suppose she could do anything of the sort," answered Millicent, with a smile. "Lydia stands upon her own independence. She would be far likelier to warn Miss Canterbury and Jane that she did not want them, than to accept of their companionship if offered. She is so strong-minded, you know. Good-bye, Sarah. Papa will be in a fever."

The first thing she saw on quitting the Rectory-gate was the carriage of Mr. Canterbury. It drew up; the footman got down to open the door, and Millicent delivered the message to her impatient father.

"Oh, very well. Good-bye, Leta, dear. I know I shall be late at the station."

The equipage bowled on, and Millicent glanced after it with a smile. He would be, as she had expressed it, in a fever until he reached the station, and then he would have twenty minutes to spare.

"What is the carriage abroad so early for?"

A hand was laid on her shoulder as the question was asked, and Millicent turned to see the lovely face of Caroline Kage. If it was unusual to see Mr. Canterbury's carriage out at that early hour, it was at least as unusual to see *her*. And Millicent, as a great many more of us do, asked the reason for it, instead of answering the question.

"Mamma came down in the crossest mood possible. She found fault with me and with every one else, so I thought I would go and have a whole morning at the schools. Work now and then makes a change. Goodness knows it is monotonous enough here."

"Monotonous!"

"I feel it so. That time at the seaside last autumn did me harm, I suppose, insomuch as that I have found Chilling intolerably weary since. And the carriage, Leta?"

Leta told her what had happened, and where Mr. Canterbury had gone. To London: summoned by the startling despatch.

"Did you charge him to give your love?"

"No; I forgot it. Things have all been at sixes-and-sevens this morning. Lydia would not have appreciated it if I had. She never cares for such messages, and never sends them."

"I was not speaking of Lydia, but of Thomas Kage."

"Caroline!"

"Ah, well! You would have liked to send it to him, you know; and he would have liked to receive it. He has only you, now his mother's gone. Don't blush, Leta!"

Leta Canterbury ran away. However the name of Thomas

Kage might cause her heart to glow, it was not pleasant to be thus spoken to. Caroline—false Caroline !—went on to the post-office before turning in to the schools, and dropped a letter into the box, addressed to Thomas Kage.

For they had fallen into the habit of corresponding with each other. But only as friends—or cousins.

CHAPTER VI.

UNDER THE MOONLIT SKY.

It was a bright Easter. And things, since that hurried visit of Mr. Canterbury's to London, had had time to get round. Mr. Dunn had died ; but Mr. Annesley was better, and at his duty again. It is true the old pastor shook his head, and said it was only the spark of a dying candle, life flickering up for a moment before going out.

Easter Monday was a great day at Chilling. Prayers at church in the morning, the poor children's treat in the school-house in the afternoon, a dinner at the Rock in the evening. They were on their way to the school-house now.

The parsonage-gate was swung back, and the good old Rector, with his benevolent face and white hair, came forth, leaning on his daughter's arm. On the small patch of green-sward beside the schools he encountered a group of friends who had stayed to talk—the Miss Canterburys, the Honourable and Reverend Austin Rufort, Mrs. Kage and her daughter. Mr. Rufort, a tall, fine man, some years past thirty, displaced Miss Annesley from her post with a smile, and gave his strong arm of support to the Rector—for whom he had latterly often come over to do duty. All these were to dine at the Rock in the evening.

"Papa, you are only to stay in the school half-an-hour, you know," said Sarah. "You will like to say grace, but Mr. Rufort must do all the talking."

"Every word of it," put in Mr. Rufort.

"I wonder, my dear sir, that you should venture to the

school at all," languidly observed Mrs. Kage. "Charity children are tiresome animals at the best."

Mrs. Kage held her glass to her eye as she spoke, surveying fresh comers. She wore a lavender-silk gown and a white bonnet, and would have called it mourning with a steady gaze. She had put on "complimentary mourning" for Lady Kage, as the latter had possessed a title. It sounded well to say to the world, "I am in mourning for the late Lady Kage," however she might have despised that lady during life. The Miss Canterburys were in mourning for Mr. Dunn—black silk and crape.

"Ah, Fry!" cried the Rector, holding out his hand to an elderly man who was leaning on a stick. "How are you, Fry?"

"I thought I'd crawl out, sir, this fine day, and just have a look at 'em for the last time," said the man addressed, who was the parish clerk, though unable to perform his duty now, and had been the boys' schoolmaster. "Your servant, gentlefolk. I shall be lying low enough before another Easter, sir."

"And some one else by your side, John, unless I am mistaken," replied Mr. Annesley, with significance.

So much occupied were they with each other, these people, as not to observe some one turn off the high-road and come towards them: a gentleman in black, with a deep band on his hat. Mrs. Kage, twirling her eye-glass on various objects within range, twirled it at length on him; and certainly thought, when she had him well to view, that the glass must be playing her false. For it looked like Thomas Kage.

"How very extraordinary!" exclaimed Mrs. Kage. "What can bring *him* here?"

They wheeled round at the words. He was close up then; and his appearance excited no little commotion, outwardly and inwardly. Those who knew him—Mr. Annesley and his daughter—put out their hands to welcome him, Mrs. Kage extended the tip of her forefinger; those who did not, stared; and the two young ladies, Millicent and Caroline, were conscious that burning blushes arose in their faces and a soft tumult in their hearts.

Millicent very shyly introduced him to her sisters—"Mr.

Kage." And Olive, who did not remember so much about "Mr. Kage" as she did, was in some doubt; but she bowed courteously in her grand way, and took an opportunity of inquiring of her sister—

"What Mr. Kage is it, Leta? Who is he?"

"Why, Olive, don't you know? The Mr. Kage we saw at Little Bay. He came down here last January, and had not time to call; papa saw him at the Rectory; and his mother, Lady Kage, died as soon as he got back to London."

Rather a roundabout explanation, Olive thought, and shyly delivered; but Leta was naturally shy, and not very fluent. Olive, enlightened as to the identity, turned to the stranger to make better acquaintance with him. She had heard through the Garstons of this mother and son—heard nothing but good; and she liked his face besides. Olive Canterbury could read countenances as a book, and said none had ever deceived her. Leta blushed again violently, for she saw her father come up to Mr. Kage with an outstretched hand. Besides that first meeting at the parsonage, they had since made better acquaintance with each other in London.

Mr. Kage's appearance was soon explained. The business on which he previously came to Aberton had again brought him down, whence he had walked over to Chilling.

"Being holiday in London, I took the opportunity of running down," he said, "not remembering that it would be a greater holiday in the country, and all the Aberton business people off for the day. I must remain there now until to-morrow."

"And dine with me, I hope, this evening at the Rock?" said Mr. Canterbury. "We shall be a pleasant party; all these friends are to meet there."

"Thank you. But I have no dress-coat with me.'

They laughed. Miss Canterbury pointedly said that she would be just as happy to see him in his frock-coat as in any other; and Mr. Rufort declared he meant to appear in a long coat, and not a short one. And so it was settled.

Millicent, stealing glances at him from where she stood apart, thought he was looking ill—wan, thin, pale. As indeed he had looked ever since his mother's death, for his grief for her was indulged to an extent that told upon him.

But the schoolroom was waiting, and they turned to it. Caroline Kage, her lovely face radiant, lingered behind with Millicent, deceitfully feeding—as it was her wont to do—the unsuspecting girl's heart with whispers of the love of Thomas Kage.

"He must have dreamt of the fête to-day, Leta, and that he would meet you at it."

"He is meeting the rest as well."

"What of that?"

"Don't you think he looks ill?"

Caroline had noticed nothing of it. She was not a quick observer.

"Every one looks pale in deep mourning. He is in black, you see, even to his shirt-studs."

"Yes. But his face has a wan, worn look."

"That's through pining after you."

"Caroline," said Leta, very gravely, and with a warm flush, "I must once more beg of you not to continue this. Why will you persist in doing it? It is the height of folly, besides being unpleasant to me, to couple my name with that of Mr. Kage. We have nothing at all to do with each other, as you must know. He does not care for me more than he does for any one else."

"Which is as much as to say that you do care for him."

"No, it is not. Do pray drop it for the future. Fancy the dilemma I should be in if Olive or any of them heard you."

Caroline laughed provokingly.

"*Please*, Caroline; you would not like it yourself. Only think of his having met papa in London! Papa never mentioned it."

"I wonder how he is left?" cried Caroline, abruptly.

"Left!"

"As to money. Mamma says Lady Kage was a great screw, so she may have saved a fortune."

"I once heard your mamma say that Lady Kage was very poor. Perhaps she meant poor for a titled woman."

"There he is, waiting for—for you, Leta."

Mr. Kage had halted outside the school-house, and was looking back. The soft flush on Caroline's face deepened; and it was she who walked in with him side-by-side,—in spite of her words—leaving Leta anywhere.

School-treats were not in Mrs. Kage's line. She came out to them because others did, and that it was a sort of gala-time, allowing for the display of her best dress and sentimental manners. This one proved not more palatable than others had been; and when the Rector left, leaning on the arm of Thomas Kage—of whom he was asking questions about his old friend Mrs. Garston—Mrs. Kage took the opportunity of leaving also. There was nothing to wait for: Mr. Canterbury had remained but a short time, Lord Rufort had not come. They were the two great resources of Mrs. Kage, with whom she liked to consort—the one esteemed for his riches, the other for his rank. "When I am with Lord Rufort, I feel at home; it seems like old days come back again," Mrs. Kage was rather fond of saying to her friends.

Leaving the clergyman indoors, Mrs. Kage turned towards her home, taking Thomas's arm without ceremony, that he might attend her to it.

"You are not in a hurry to get back for five minutes?" observed Mrs. Kage.

In point of fact, that estimable lady had an end to serve. In spite of her daughter's ruse to deceive her, persisted in still, Mrs. Kage could not help indulging a faint suspicion that the love, if there existed any, was not between Mr. Kage and Leta Canterbury, but between Mr. Kage and Caroline herself. This would be terribly awkward—not to be thought of at all—if Thomas had nothing but his profession. If, however, he had inherited money from his mother, why perhaps his having the misfortune to be the son of that despised woman might in time be overcome. Mrs. Kage had heard of instances where barristers—on whom she scornfully looked down as a class—had risen to the Woolsack. A rumour had reached Chilling that Lady Kage had died rich. Mrs. Kage was surprised, but thought it might be so. This must be ascertained.

Crossing the road from the Rectory, a privet-path—as it was called, from the fact of there being a privet-hedge on either side—led to Mrs. Kage's house. It was not far, and she talked of ordinary things as they went along. Causing him to enter the sitting-room, she closed the door.

"And now that we have a moment to ourselves, Thomas,

dear, you must allow me to ask how things are left?" she began, in an affectionate, confidential tone, such as she had never used to him in her life. "Your dear mother's death came upon me, I assure you, with an overwhelming shock."

"As it did on all of us," he quietly answered, standing by the window, while she took her seat on the opposite sofa.

"Ay, it was very sad. I would have made Caroline read the burial-service to me the day of the interment, but that it might have given her gloomy ideas, poor child."

The calling up of such was by no means agreeable to Mrs. Kage herself, even now; and she emptied three-fourths of a phial of Cologne-water on her handkerchief.

"Sit down, Thomas; I cannot talk on these melancholy subjects unless people are close to me. Are you left well off, my dear?"

"A great deal better off than I expected to be. My mother was full of love for me to the end."

"That's well," said Mrs. Kage, opening her fan complaisantly. "Had Lady Kage saved much money?"

"Yes, I consider that she had."

His ideas, in so answering, were running on his mother's narrow income, and what she had had to do with it. Mrs. Kage's notions were altogether different, very high in the air indeed.

"And she has left it all to you, dearest Thomas?"

"She has left it all to my sister, Mrs. Lowther. Not any of it to me."

It was very rare that Mrs. Kage allowed so vulgar an emotion as surprise to be seen on her face, but she could not help it now. And, indeed, this answer seemed at variance with what he had just said. Her manner froze a little.

"We are connections, you know, Thomas; I can scarcely say relatives. Perhaps you will not mind telling me the particulars of how your mother's affairs were left. It is only natural that I should have thought sometimes about it."

"I will tell you everything with the greatest pleasure," he replied, his frank countenance bent a little forward, his honest eyes fixed on hers, as he sat resting his arm on the table. "There is not much to tell——"

"Your mother made a will, I presume?" interrupted Mrs. Kage, sharply.

"She made a will, and left me sole executor. The money she had been able to save turned out, after all claims were paid, to be over eight hundred pounds. I gave Charlotte my cheque for it last week."

Mrs. Kage's mouth fell. To one whose thoughts are running upon twice as many thousands, eight hundred pounds seems very mean and miserable.

"Oh!" said Mrs. Kage. "Then what did you mean by saying she left you better off than you expected?"

"When the will was opened, I found she had left me the greater portion of the furniture. A few of the things only go to Charlotte, and half the silver, which was but a very small amount altogether. A sum was set apart for the next year's rent, and I am enjoined to remain in the house for that period, should nothing of importance call me from it."

Mrs. Kage was fanning herself rather violently. "A very unjust will, I must say!" she remarked. "Charlotte Lowther was no blood-relation to your mother."

"She was my father's child; and my mother loved her as her own. Besides, Charlotte wants help far more than I do. I think the will the most just that my dear mother could have made."

"Oblige me by setting light to a pastille, Thomas; there's one close to you. Did Lady Kage leave anything to Dorothy?"

"She left her to me," he answered, with a slight smile, as he looked for the pastille. "Dorothy had twenty pounds, and her next year's wages paid in advance."

"And you have only a few paltry bits of old furniture! Dear me! One does hear of queer things."

"It is so much more than I looked for. I only hoped to have her blessing. Do you know, when I read the will, and found the home was secured to me for a year, and the rent paid and Dorothy's wages, I felt quite a rich man. If I could only see my mother for one moment to pour out my gratitude to her!"

Mrs. Kage did not think it worth while to contend further;

she looked upon him as only three degrees removed from a fool. She felt half inclined to look on herself as another, for having for a moment entertained the thought that Lady Kage could have died worth anything to speak of. Thomas was at liberty to leave her now; and she composed herself after a few drops of red lavender, which the maid came in to administer, for a refreshing nap.

It lasted so long that she found, on awaking, she had barely time to dress for dinner at the Rock. Caroline was late, too, and came forth from her room at the last moment, in a white dress and black sash, with jet necklace and bracelets. Mrs. Kage stared at the attire, so different from what had been fixed upon.

"And your pink silk? And your pearls?"

"Oh, mamma, I *could* not put them on!" was Caroline's answer, with quite a burst of feeling. "How could I go out in colours, when Thomas Kage, in his deep black, was to dine at my side?"

"You were not in mourning to-day. He saw you then."

"I know it all; and I never felt so ashamed of myself before. He cared so much for his mother; and she has not been dead quite two months!"

"And if she has not?"

"He must think us so heartless."

"It is not of any consequence what he thinks. He—— Is that the carriage? Dear me! I wanted to have told you something."

The large close carriage, with its attendant servants, belonging to the Rock, had bowled up, Mr. and Miss Annesley inside it. It had been arranged that it should call for Mrs. Kage and Caroline, and convey them home in the evening.

Thomas Kage, he could not tell why, unless it was through hearing so much of the great revenues of the master of the Rock, had in his own mind associated the place with just the slightest soupçon of ostentation; that sort of display we are apt to fancy as pertaining to the nouveau riche. His late father's name had secured for Mr. Kage the entrance into good society, and his tastes, a little fastidious, were all on the side of simplicity.

He was agreeably surprised. When he saw the order and refined breeding that prevailed at the Rock; its perfectly-appointed rooms and service; its intellectual books and quiet ways; the pure home-life that shone out unmistakably; the simple manners of the girls; and the lack of ostentation in any shape; his conscience smote him. Luxury there was certainly at the Rock; it could not be otherwise with such an income as George Canterbury's; but it was a luxury felt, rather than seen, one that might belong to a taste pure as his own.

Lord Rufort, a tall man, stiff as a poker, with iron-grey hair and a head that bent to nobody, took in Miss Canterbury; Mr. Canterbury took Mrs. Kage. Thomas Kage neither saw nor knew how the rest of the party were paired: he had Caroline, and that was all he cared for. Leta fell to Austin Rufort—and thought herself very ill-used. Perhaps Mr. Rufort considered *he* was; for he looked upon Leta as a schoolgirl, and would a great deal rather have been with her sister Jane. But Jane was allotted to Mr. Carlton of Chilling Hall. Miss Canterbury always exercised her privilege of ordering these social arrangements, and there might be no appealing against her authority.

Sixteen were at table. Olive, magnificent in her black-net dress, with the white rose in her hair and a small black circlet inlaid with silver on her beautiful neck, was at its head; a noble, gracious mistress. Mr. Canterbury, good-looking still, quite young, so to say, erect, slender, sat at its foot—Mrs. Kage beside him, her neck terribly thin and wiry through its lace covering. The servants were ample and attentive; the appointments of the table rich and beautiful. Better than all, the guests amalgamated, and sociability reigned. It was the pleasantest dinner-party Thomas Kage had ever been present at, and for its brief existence he was cheated into forgetting his grief and the mother who had been so much to him. Time is a great consoler, and the sincerest mourner of us all insensibly yields to it. While we are saying, "I shall never look up again from the blow that has fallen on me," Heaven itself is gently lifting the weight from the heavy eyes.

There was music after dinner. So genial was the night that the large window of one of the drawing-rooms was flung open,

and some of them stood at it and looked out on the fair scene beyond, steeped in moonlight. But Mr. Canterbury came up to preach about the night-air, and had it closed. Mr. Annesley and his daughter went home immediately after dinner. Mrs. Kage, who was to have taken advantage of the carriage to leave when they did, said she was not ready to go, and remained.

"Olive," said Mr. Canterbury, sitting down for a minute by his daughter, "what an exceedingly nice fellow he is!"

"Who, papa?" Miss Canterbury naturally asked.

"Young Kage. I liked him the first time I saw him, that few minutes at the parsonage last January; I liked him more in London; I like him most now. An uncommonly clever man, I know; sensible and unaffected."

Olive nodded; and smiled to find her father right for once. In a general way George Canterbury could no more read character than a block of wood could. She, keen and sure in discernment, had also conceived a liking for Thomas Kage. And the evening wore on.

Mr. Carlton offered a seat in his carriage to Mrs. Kage: Caroline in her wilful way, said she should walk home; the night was too lovely not to be enjoyed; her cousin, Thomas Kage, could take care of her.

Very lovely, indeed, was it when they went out, Caroline with a shawl on her shoulders and nothing on her head. Mr. Canterbury was afraid she would catch faceache, at which Caroline burst into laughter: it was only old people who did that, she saucily answered. Two or three of the other guests walked also, and they all set out together, choosing the way across the fields. Jane and Leta Canterbury went with them as far as the side-gate, and then ran home merrily. Oh, the happy, careless days of youth! when the body fears no ailments, and the mind knows naught of trouble.

Mrs. Kage, deposited at home by Mr. Carlton's carriage, heard the noise they made in coming over the fields, and she opened the shutter to look out. Her eyes were growing dim, which she would not have acknowledged for the world; but it is wonderful how keen dim eyes can still be when swayed by fear or self-interest. She managed to discern—and a frown

rose to her face as she did so—that though the rest were laughing and talking loudly, Caroline and Mr. Kage walked apart, far behind, concerning themselves only with one another.

It was so. When they came out, Caroline went close to him, and he gave her his arm. It was she who caused their steps to linger; it was her voice that first took the low, tremulous tone that of itself unconsciously betrayed love. Thomas Kage's whole heart was bursting with it; a sweet tumult, in the delight of her presence, of holding her on his arm, was aglow within him. But he was of a strictly honourable nature, and made no sign; walking along, save for a commonplace word now and again, in telling silence.

Mrs. Kage, getting him by her that evening in Miss Canterbury's drawing-room, had whispered with affectionate candour a word or two of her great views for her daughter. Caroline was to make a match in accordance with the rank of her grandfather, Lord Gunse. Mrs. Kage was not sure, she added, that the Honourable and Reverend Mr. Rufort had not cast a covetous eye on Caroline; but she had taken care to give him a hint that her daughter must marry wealth as well as rank. Crafty Mrs. Kage knew perfectly well that the Honourable and Reverend Mr. Rufort thought no more of her daughter than he did of her; but she deemed it convenient to invent the fable for the benefit of Thomas Kage.

To what end? She need not have feared that Thomas Kage would speak of love to her daughter, or to any other young lady, until his position enabled him to speak to some purpose. So far as present prospects went, that desirable state of affairs would be achieved by the time Caroline might expect to be a grandmother. He would have given the whole world for his circumstances to be different; but they were not, and he could not make them so. Not under any seductive surroundings was Thomas Kage one to lose his head incautiously: his prudence was in his own hands if his love was not, and Caroline's true interests were as dear to him as she was. She was as safe from avowals with him as with her mother.

But he had not the least objection to linger as long as might be on this night walk—which would remain in his memory as one of the few sweet moments of existence until time for him

should be no more. The moon, looking like pale gold in the blue sky, shone, white and lovely, on the blades of early grass on either side the field-path, on the budding hedges, on the stile they would have to cross; the air was balmy, the night altogether one of bright, soft loveliness. That Caroline loved him, Mr. Kage no longer doubted; her manner showed it very plainly. He had fondly fancied it before; he knew it now; and it may be that his accents took a more tender tone in spite of himself as he spoke to her—a tone rarely mistaken by its recipient. A dazzling vision of future promise seemed to rise in the sky, turning all things to gold. Don't blame him for it —remember the moments when it arose for you.

"Is it true that we shall not see you after to-night?" she asked, breaking a long interval of silence.

"Quite true. I must get my business in Aberton over betimes to-morrow, and return by the eleven-o'clock train."

"I wonder you do not manage to stay a little longer," she went on, hoping he would not hear the beating of her heart. "Perhaps you do not care to do so."

"I should care for it very much, Caroline; but it is one of the things that cannot be. Life has its crosses as well as its hopes and pleasures."

"Have you crosses?"

"Yes."

"What are they?"

"Some of them would not particularly interest you. Others, that might do so, I cannot mention now."

"Why not?"

"The time has not yet come. Should it ever do so, you shall hear them."

It is possible that she understood him; it is even possible that he intended she should do so. There was no more said. Caroline remembered afterwards, with a burning blush, that she had unconsciously pressed his arm a shade closer by way of answer; and they walked the rest of the way in that delicious, conscious silence which is more eloquent than words.

"I must run back; I have left my umbrella at the Rock," he exclaimed, as they reached Mrs. Kage's gate between the laurels, where the rest of the party had halted. "In five

minutes I shall be back again, Caroline, and will come in to wish your mother good-bye."

Caroline went in, and said as much to Mrs. Kage. That lady received the message ungraciously. Closing the half-shutter she had held open to reconnoitre, she sat down by the fire in the midst of her scents and pastilles.

"He need not trouble himself to wish me good-bye; it does not matter. What a blow he has had!"

"Who has?" cried Caroline.

"Tom Kage. I said he looked worn and ill."

"But what is it?"

Caroline's breath was hushed a little as she spoke. And Mrs. Kage, flirting out some pungent essence from a patent-stoppered bottle, flirted it by accident into Caroline's face.

"His mother has not left him a shilling; she has left it all to Charlotte—what's her name?—I never can remember it. Not that it was much to leave—a few paltry hundreds. He says he is glad Charlotte should have it instead of him, of which I believe just as much as I like. Of course the poor creature *wants* it, with her crowd of children and her scrambling life. It serves her right. Sir Charles Kage's daughter (who was not connected, you know, with the low woman he afterwards married) should have respected herself better than to marry a man beneath her—one of those working engineers."

Caroline Kage, sitting with her cheek in her hand and her elbow on the arm of the chair, felt as if her heart had grown cold suddenly.

"Lady Kage was not a low woman, mamma."

"Not a low woman!" softly responded Mrs. Kage, taking up her smelling-salts. "My dear Caroline, do you think you know better than I? In the old days, when Maria Carr came into the room in attendance on the little Charlotte, she did not presume to sit in the presence of my family—not to sit, my dear, unless bade to do so. Ah, it was a fatal thing, Sir Charles's engaging the girl! And he did it in the teeth of the most munificent offer made him by my people."

Caroline questioned with her eyes.

"My mother went to him and offered to take the child into our house and bring her up, without recompense of course,

except what Sir Charles might choose voluntarily to give. She urged it on him; and, by the way, Charlotte showed her self-willed temper then; for when my sister Matilda caught her to her arms and said, would she go home with her to be loved and have sugar-plums, the ill-conditioned little wretch set up a loud scream. My mother told Sir Charles it was her black frock that made her cry, and Sir Charles said, 'Most likely.' He did not accept the offer, and what were the deplorable consequences? Maria Carr entered the house, and never went out of it."

Overpowered by the reminiscence, Mrs. Kage saturated her handkerchief with eau-de-Cologne and held it to her nose, glancing furtively over the cambric at her daughter.

"Has Thomas Kage had nothing left to him?" asked Caroline, thinking only of the one thing.

"Nothing. She paid the rent of the place they are in for a year, that he might have, at least for that time, a roof over his head; and Dorothy's wages for as long, that she might see to him. A few of the old chairs and tables are his; nothing more. My dear, I see how it will be, and *he* sees it—that in twenty years to come he will be no better off than he is now, a poor briefless barrister, toiling for bread-and-cheese, and hardly earning it. He has no interest; he told me so to-day. How can he get on?"

Caroline put her hand for a moment upon her chest, as if it pained her.

"Is this true, mamma?"

"It is as true as Heaven's gospel," responded Mrs. Kage; and for once in her life, forgetting her languid affectation, she spoke with energy, her face lighted up with interest. Caroline saw that it *was* true; and with that miserable moment the sunshine of her young life went out.

Thomas Kage came back laughing, his breath spent, carrying his umbrella. The early day had been cloudy; the night might have turned rainy, and he had to walk to Aberton. Mr. Canterbury had offered a carriage, but it was not accepted. He had come from the Rock with a pressing invitation from its master to go and stay there during the autumn vacation. This he told them now.

"Ah, indeed," drawled Mrs. Kage, quite oppressed with languor; "I wouldn't advise you to accept it: there would be no enjoyment. Olive Canterbury is dictatorial, and Jane is buried in church and school business; and Leta's a simpleton. I will say adieu to you, Thomas. It is late, and I am fatigued. This has been quite a day of dissipation." She held out the tips of two fingers. Nothing more.

Caroline, asking no one's leave, went out with him round the laurels to the outer gate. He turned and took her hand when he passed through it.

"Good-bye, Caroline," he said in low tones.. "God bless you!"

Her heart was sore with its pain; she struggled with it for an instant and burst into tears.

He was intensely surprised. Perhaps, had he said a word then of the love and hope that so yearned for utterance, their lives might have been widely different, and the course of events so changed, that the great trouble lying in the womb of the future, and which was destined to overshadow one of them fatally, the other in a degree, had never been led up to.

"Good-bye, Thomas—good-bye."

The words, spoken with a wail of anguish, came forth as abruptly as the tears had done. She wrenched her hand from his, after pressing his fingers almost to pain, shot rapidly indoors, and he heard the bolt slipped.

"Good night, mamma," Caroline called out as she passed the sitting-room. "I'm going to bed."

Forth from the open chamber window she leaned in her dinner-dress, the moonlight playing on her white shoulders, on the tears streaming down her cheeks.

Caroline had the sense to look matters in the face and judge them truly. She knew that she never could be a poor man's wife, unless she would become a wretched, heartless woman, like her mother—worried in private, made up of small affectations in public, discontented and false always. She loved Thomas Kage with that passionate love that can touch the heart but once; but she knew that she must give him up, and her heart half broke with its pain. She watched him across the open fields towards Aberton, only the faintest speck in the

distance now; he was all but out of sight; and her young face grew wild with anguish, and her covetous eyes were strained through their blinding tears. In an excess of despair she flung her hands out imploringly.

"Farewell, Thomas, my best-beloved!—farewell for ever!"

She fell asleep towards morning, and dreamt of coming into ten thousand a-year, and of happiness with Thomas Kage; and for some few moments after waking, the dream held the semblance of a blissful reality. A faint cry—than which no moan ever contained deeper anguish—supervened. The truth had dawned on Caroline Kage.

CHAPTER VII.

ENTERING A NEW HOME.

Summer weather had come in, and the heat and the dust of a windy day in early June filled the London streets. The pavements were scorched below, the wind reigned above. It was a relief to Thomas Kage when he turned into the shelter of one of the railway-stations, to meet a train that came from the direction of Wales.

Five minutes, and it steamed in. It had left Aberton in the morning, and the journey had been uneventful. Mr. Kage regarded each first-class carriage attentively as it slowly passed, and saw a young lady in deep mourning looking from a window. A cordial smile lighted up his eyes as he raised his hat in recognition.

Death had been finding its way to Chilling. The good old Rector, Philip Annesley, had not been mistaken in saying that his apparently renewed lease of life was deceptive, like unto a candle that shoots up brightly for a moment before going out. Almost close upon the festivities of that Easter Monday, he had failed again, and Death came in to claim its own.

The value of the living was moderate—barely three hundred a-year—and Mr. Annesley for some ten years past had to keep a curate, and pay him out of it, besides other expenses. Until

recently an invalid sister had been partly dependent on him; he was in the habit of transmitting her ten pounds every quarter. The repairs to the parsonage-house—which he had to make—had cost a great deal: he was very charitable; and altogether his income had been absorbed. Nevertheless, plenty of people were found to say he ought to have saved more, when it was heard how very slender a provision was left for his daughter.

Not a provision at all, as the world would count it. When all resources were gathered together, including the sum paid for the furniture by the new Rector, it was found that she would have about thirty pounds a-year. Not a fraction more: if anything, rather less. She had been invited to take up her temporary abode with some relatives in London, until—to use the expression of the lady inviting her—she could turn herself round; which, of course, meant, secure some suitable employment.

The new Rector appointed to the living of Chilling was the Honourable and Reverend Austin Rufort. This had been expected; and, for a wonder, every one was satisfied. Mr. Rufort did not wish to hurry Miss Annesley from her home: had she chosen to remain in it for a twelvemonth she had been welcome; but when once things were settled, she thought it well to leave. Mr Annesley had been dead about six weeks then. Accepting the invitation offered to her, she fixed the day of her journey to London, and Thomas Kage had been solicited to receive her at the station.

"How kind it is of you to come and meet me!" she exclaimed in glad accents. "How very kind!"

Expecting to meet none but strangers, half afraid of encountering the bustle of the great Babel, the sight of a face she knew struck upon her with joyous surprise, with more importance in fact than the slight circumstance deserved. To the low-spirited girl, full of doubt and shrinking, it really had the appearance of a good omen.

"Mrs. Annesley requested me to come. She is not well herself, and her daughter is scarcely old enough to be trusted to the station. Perhaps I might say not steady enough," he added, with a good-natured smile, as they walked together along the platform, and waited to see the luggage thrown out of the van.

Sarah smiled too. "I have heard Mrs. Dunn call her flighty."

"Precisely so. She is only a young girl, full of life and merriment. Mrs. Annesley, with her ill-health, is too grave a companion for her."

"Mrs. Annesley is a great invalid, is she not?"

"She seems to be always ailing. She has nervous headaches, for one thing. Just now she is recovering from a severe attack of bronchitis."

"Are you very intimate with them?"

"Not very. I happened to call last evening. Mrs. Annesley had been regretting that she had no one but a servant to send here to meet you, and I said perhaps I should do instead."

"I would rather have seen your face than any one's," spoke Sarah, with simple truth. "You do not know how much I dread strangers."

"Is Mrs. Annesley quite a stranger to you?"

"Very nearly so. Ten years ago my dear father and I were in London for five days, and stayed at their house—Mr. Annesley was living then—and the following summer they came to us for a month at Chilling, with the little girl—a fair, sweet child of about seven. That is all the acquaintance I have had with them. We have not even corresponded, except on any extraordinary occasion; and I think it very kind of Mrs. Annesley to invite me now."

"She could do no less," said Thomas Kage. "Your father and her husband were brothers."

"Only half-brothers. Mr. James Annesley was twenty years younger than papa, and they were not very cordial with each other. My dear father thought he had been much wronged in regard to the family property, which was left entirely to Mr. James Annesley; but it is unnecessary to recall that now. My good father put away the grievance from his heart long and long ago."

"Had Mrs. Annesley not invited you to stay with her, Mrs. Garston would," he remarked. "I think she resents having been forestalled in it."

"There's my luggage!" exclaimed Sarah. "Box the first coming out now."

"How many boxes have you?'

"Two and a small one. Mr. Rufort kindly said I might leave as much lumber as I liked at home until I knew what my plans would be. Is it not strange, Mr. Kage, that I and Lydia Dunn should cross each other?"

"Cross each other!" he repeated, at a loss to understand what she meant.

"Don't you know?—Mrs. Dunn is going down to the Rock to-day on a long visit. I am so sorry. Had she been in London, the great town might have seemed less strange to me. She is a widow now, you are aware?"

"Yes, these four or five months past."

Not until they were seated in the cab did Thomas Kage speak of the loss she had sustained, and of his deep sympathy with it; and then only by a word or two. Those who feel the deepest say the least. She understood him, and the tears came into her eyes. Not very long ago *he* had gone through the same sorrow and suffering.

Mrs. Annesley, the widow, lived in Paradise Terrace. Substantial houses, but not to be compared with the mansions in the grand square adjoining—Paradise Square. Thomas Kage accompanied her into her house, and introduced her to its mistress, who left the fireside and an easy-chair to receive her.

She was four-and-fifty years of age, and she looked four-and-sixty. A cold, silent woman, with grey hair, straight black eyebrows, and a severe expression of face. Her heart was warmer than her manner, but neither would have set the Thames on fire; and she was well-meaning, wishing to do her duty by all. She was apt to tell people, if they inquired, that she never enjoyed a day's health: what with ailments of one kind and another, and giving way to them, she perhaps never did. Recently she had been really ill, and would not feel recovered for a long time to come.

Mrs. Annesley welcomed Sarah, her niece one degree removed (if it may be called so), with as much cordiality as a woman of her cold and reserved nature could do. She kissed her cheek, and said she was welcome. Sarah caught at the arm of Thomas Kage: for a momentary faintness, quite unusual, stole over her. To one who has had a happy and

beloved home of her own, to enter that of a stranger is a bitter heart-sickness.

Years and years ago—more than you, my reader, would care to say you can look back to—Philip Annesley, a young man keeping his first term at the Cambridge University, heard with intense surprise and some natural shock that his father had married again. He had deemed that he and his sister were all-in-all to their father; but it seemed that he was mistaken. The new wife gained full ascendency; later she had one son born; and when death, some twenty years afterwards, took the old man, her husband, it was discovered that he had bequeathed the whole of his property to her, unconditionally. In her turn she bequeathed it to her own son, James; ignoring Philip, then incumbent of Chilling; ignoring the daughter, Mary, who had lived at home with her.

Had James Annesley been a just and right-feeling man, he would at once have divided the property into three shares, giving one each to his half-brother and sister. He did nothing of the kind. He kept the whole; and Philip in his heart resented it. Mary found a home with her brother Philip at Chilling, who was still a single man, and remained so for some years after that. When he did marry, Mary left him. James wanted her then, for he had married, and been left a widower with one little boy. Later by ever so many years, James married again, the present Mrs. Annesley, now standing to receive Sarah and Mr. Kage, and she had one daughter.

I hope the account has been clear. With so many people and interests and marriages to speak of, matters are apt to grow a little complicated. James Annesley, when he died, did not do as his father had done—leave all he had to his wife unconditionally. The interest was to be hers for her life—a handsome income. At her death it would go to the two children, but not equally. His son by his first wife would take the larger share, the younger girl the smaller. Perhaps Mrs. Annesley felt aggrieved at this, but she had no power to remedy it. Old Mrs. Garston, rapping her stick with ardour, told her to her face it was the only just thing James Annesley ever did. The son, Walter Annesley, had been sent to the West Indies as clerk in a merchant's house. He was getting

on well, was married, and had a prospect, it was understood, of a junior partnership.

Sarah Annesley, rallying from the passing sensation of faintness—for there lived not a young woman in the world less willing to give way than she—turned from Mr. Kage to meet the young girl who had come up and waited. A bright fairy of seventeen, with a profusion of fair hair that she chose to wear in a shower of curls, laughing blue eyes, and saucy features. She had no regular beauty whatever, only the great charm that youth and a kind of wild carelessness sometimes impart. The hair was beautiful; the laughing light-blue eyes were beautiful; and there the boasting ended. The nose was small, and turned up: the very pointed chin was one of the most impertinent ever seen. She was very little, not of the smallest moment to look at, impudent to every one about her except her mother, and saucy to the rest of the world. But these saucy, piquant women often sway man with an iron hand, and render him helpless.

Sarah kissed her involuntarily, and then held her at arm's length, regarding her with quite a fond expression. The child (she quite looked like one) wore a pretty black silk dress with a white lace edging at the neck, and black ribbons falling about her fair hair.

"Can this be little Belle? But perhaps I ought not to call her Belle now?"

"Belle always," spoke Mrs. Annesley. "Annabel only when I am seriously angry with her."

"Is that often?" put in Mr. Kage.

Miss Belle, in answer to his question and smile, gave him a sharp flirting rap with her jet chain. But an imperceptible sigh broke from Mrs. Annesley. It seemed to imply that she found her daughter more troublesome than perhaps Mr. Kage might have given her credit for. It appeared almost impossible that that careless, laughing, blue-eyed girl could be the daughter of the staid, stony, dark-browed woman: the one so redolent of light-hearted gaiety, the other seeming never to have known it. Between thirty and forty when she married, Mrs. Annesley had been already set down as an "old maid" by the generous world. She had certainly been stiff and cold as any old maid

can be; and though the reproach was lifted from her, she remained stiff to the end. But the fault—it has just been said so—lay in manner more than in heart.

"Will you show your cousin to her room, Belle?" spoke Mrs. Annesley. "Harriet will be waiting there, no doubt."

The first thing Miss Belle did when she was outside the door was to plant herself at the foot of the stairs, impeding further progress, and stare into her cousin's face.

"I remember you quite well; I remember lots of things when I was younger than that; but you are looking ever so much older."

"Of course I am," said Sarah. "It is ten years ago."

"Good gracious! You must be getting an old woman."

"Getting on that way. I shall be thirty in three years."

"How dreadful! When I am thirty it will be all over, for I would as soon be sixty at once. What I want to say is this—you are not going to watch me?"

"To watch you?" repeated Sarah.

"Yes, to watch me; to be a spy upon me. Because, if you are, I'll not stand it."

"My dear child, I really do not know what you mean."

"Yesterday, when mamma was talking about my wildness, she said how glad she was you were coming, for she should ask you to look after me and report to her all you saw amiss. Oh, you can't imagine what it is at home! She's like an old lady-abbess, looking after a flock of nuns. If my bedroom is in a mess, she groans; if I buy a sash without first asking her, she sighs, and says I'm on the high-road to ruin. Perhaps I should be, if I had an old duenna at my heels always to whisper ill of me; I'm sure I'd spend a crown then where I now spend half one. The other day she nearly fainted because she came into the study and found all my oil-paints spilt on the carpet. You won't tell tales of me, will you?"

"No; certainly not."

"That is a promise?" said Miss Belle, with a stamp of her pretty foot.

"It is; and I will keep it faithfully. There's the seal, Belle."

Sarah bent forward and kissed the bright young face upturned

to hers. Belle was a very syren; and she had some of a syren's attributes, besides fascination.

Having seen Miss Annesley safely housed, Thomas Kage took his departuure for Mrs. Garston's. He was making the afternoon into a sort of holiday, and did not go back to his chambers: but it was getting late now. Mrs. Garston had charged him to come and inform her all about Miss Annesley's arrival; and Thomas Kage, who had been in the habit of obeying her for many years almost as he did his mother, insensibly did it more than ever now that that mother was gone.

A stylish open vehicle on two wheels, with a stylish tiger holding the horse, stood before the gate as he reached it. Mr. Kage wondered whose they were, when the appearance of Captain Dawkes, jauntily treading the gravel-path, solved the problem. The gallant captain had been making a call on the lady, whom he rather facetiously styled the "ancient party" to his military friends. Not staying to shake hands with Mr. Kage, he ascended to his seat with a patronizing nod, touched the horse, and dashed away, his purple whiskers more silken than ever, his teeth whiter, his cheeks and himself altogether blooming.

As Mr. Kage passed in at the garden-gate, Mrs. Garston met him in the pathway. On sunny days she was fond of being out of doors, and walked about the sheltered garden almost as firmly as she did twenty years before, never accepting help except from her stick, planted vigorously on the ground with every step she took. Therefore Thomas Kage did not offer his arm, but simply turned with her and kept by her side. He was in deep mourning still; the old lady wore an enormous sun-bonnet of grey silk, and a white llama shawl.

"Did you see that turn-out?" were the first words she addressed to him, in allusion to the equipage just departed: and, by the tone, Thomas knew that it, or something else, had displeased her.

"Yes," he said. "The horse is a high-mettled one; Captain Dawkes must take care of him in the more crowded streets."

Captain Dawkes was in feather again. Mrs. Garston had prevailed upon herself to pay his debts and set him free. It

was some three or four months ago now. At temporary ease in the world, he lived as a man of fortune, and paid visits to Mrs. Garston as often as he could force himself to the infliction.

"He has begun again."

The remark was given abruptly, and Thomas Kage, whose thoughts had gone roving to other matters, really did not catch its meaning.

"Begun what, ma'am?"

"Begun what? Why, to make more debts," irascibly returned Mrs. Garston. "I'm speaking of Barby Dawkes. He has as much reason to set up that fine tandem as I have to set up a dandy-horse. Where's the use of your laughing, Thomas Kage?"

He was biting his lip, not to hide the smile—for he could but be open in all he did—but to prevent its going on to a laugh. Mrs. Garston would look curious on a dandy-horse.

"It is not a tandem, ma'am."

"It *is* a tandem! Why do you contradict? It's a tandem that he has set up; he told me so to my face. There may be one horse in the shafts to-day, but he puts another on at times, and always in the country. I told him he'd look more consistent in a wheelbarrow drawn by two grey jackasses."

"If Captain Dawkes is tolerably cautious in other matters, he can afford to keep two horses," spoke Mr. Kage, who would willingly have smoothed away displeasure from his worst enemy.

"If! Did you ever hear of Barby Dawkes being cautious? I set him free with the world last March. This is June; and I'd lay you the worth of these two houses, yours and mine, that he has already made a string of debts a yard long. Now then, Thomas Kage!"

Thomas Kage strolled on the lawn by the old lady's side in silence. He thought it quite probable that the already-contracted debts might be two yards long, instead of one; but he would not say so.

"I told Barby what it would be. I told Keziah that my setting him free, if I did do it, would only be the signal for him to begin again to run up fresh liabilities; and he is doing it. Don't tell me!"

"I suppose he says he is not?"

"He wouldn't say he is to me, be you sure of that; but I have warned him—and take you notice of it, Thomas Kage. When he stood up before me smiling, not five minutes ago, I warned him as plainly as words can do it. 'Run 'em up,' I said to him, 'run up a cartload of 'em, if you choose, Barby Dawkes; but you may find it much harder to get me to discharge them than you have done.' Whatever comes of it, he can't say I didn't warn him. There! I must sit down."

She took her seat on a bench under a fine old spreading tree. Mr. Kage placed himself by her, and began speaking of the arrival of Miss Annesley from Chilling. It was rather a sore subject with Mrs. Garston: first, because Sarah Annesley had been left without provision; and secondly, that she had been forestalled by Mrs. Annesley in the invitation to London.

"Thirty pounds a-year, perhaps under it!" commented the old lady, striking her stick sharply on the soft grass. "Philip Annesley had three hundred a-year, and a house to live in, and might have done better for her. We were playfellows together when we were children, he and I; but I was the elder by some five years. I remember once a mad cow ran after us, and we leaped a dwarf wall, and scrambled through a thick blackberry-hedge. You wouldn't think it now."

"You could not do it now," was his answer.

"I thought Philip would have had more sense: his brains were sharp as a boy. No one should live up to their income if they've children to provide for; mark you that, Thomas Kage. But I hope it will be a long time before you put yourself in the way of having any."

A very conscious flush crossed his cheek. Within the last day or two a possible view of advancement had been laid before him; and, if he accepted it—and Caroline Kage——

"I wonder she could stomach that invitation of Mrs. Annesley's!" came the interruption to his thoughts in the quaint language of the old lady, which belonged to a bygone day. "I do; and I don't think her father would have liked her to, either. If ever man was ill-used among them, he was. Philip Annesley was brought up to think he'd succeed to half his father's property, and his sister to the other half. Old Annesley marries again, drivels on for twenty years in his tight

keeping under his new wife's thumb, and then dies and leaves every shilling to *her* son James. It's all very well to say Philip forgave them, as a good clergyman and Christian should; but I'll be whipped if he must not have been an uncommon good one to do it."

"I think he was that, Mrs. Garston."

"I don't say the present Mrs. Annesley, James's widow, had any hand in the injustice; she didn't know them at the time; but she became James's wife afterwards, and that would have been enough to make some people resent it on her as belonging to them. She enjoys the money too—seven hundred a-year, Thomas."

"Is it so much as that?"

"It is that in hard income, my dear; and there was furniture, and plate, and accumulated money besides. James did not make quite so unjust a will as his wretched old father: he left his wife a life-interest only; at her death the son in the West Indies gets four hundred a-year of it; the girl three; the furniture and things to go as Mrs. Annesley chooses. And we need not speculate upon who will get that, considering that the girl is her daughter, the young man only her step-son. But James never remembered the supposed claims of the Philip Annesleys; and I say I wouldn't have accepted an invitation from any of the lot, had I been Philip's daughter. What does she say about those Kages?"

The transition was abrupt. Thomas, who had been sitting in a reverie, his eyes bent on the grass, hearing and not hearing, looked up.

"What Kages, ma'am?"

Mrs. Garston lifted her stick as if she had a mind to strike him, bringing it down on the grass with a thump. "If you get into the habit of useless cavilling, Thomas Kage, you'll hear a bit of my mind. I mean those Kages down at Chilling—the woman with the affectation and the smelling-bottles. Her soft voice is as false as Barby Dawkes's smile when he tells me he is living within his income. *I* knew her as Caroline Gunse, and what she was; and her daughter takes after her. Did I ever know any other Kages, pray, except yourself and your dear mother? Do *you* know any?"

"No."

"Very well, then, why need you ask me what Kages? What does Sarah Annesley say about them?"

"She said nothing, except that they are well. Miss Annesley will come and see you herself to-morrow. She is vexed at one thing—that Mrs. Dunn should have gone down home just at this time, and regrets her absence very much."

"A fine thing *she* is to regret!" scornfully spoke Mrs. Garston.

"I fancy Miss Annesley was particularly intimate with her when she was Lydia Canterbury; more so than with the other sisters."

"Then why could not Lydia Dunn have put off her visit for a week, and stayed here to receive her?" sensibly spoke Mrs. Garston. "Perhaps she cares for Lydia Dunn more than Lydia Dunn cares for her. *My* opinion is, if you wish to know it, that Mrs. Lydia Dunn never cared for any one but her own blessed self. And you may tell Philip Annesley's daughter that I say it. Where are you going, Thomas?"

"Home."

"You are not; you are going to dine with me. Don't you know that you are worth fifty thousand of such men as Barnaby Dawkes?"

He smiled, and took out his watch. It wanted half-an-hour to her usual dinner-hour. Mrs. Garston's invitations were commands, and might not be rejected when it was possible to accept them. "Thank you," he said; "I will be back by six; but I expect a letter will be waiting for me at home, and I may have to write an answer to it."

It was there. When he reached home, the letter was staring him in the face. He opened it, not eagerly, but slowly and thoughtfully, as if it were big with some momentous fate that he felt half afraid to encounter.

A proposition had been made to Thomas Kage to go out to India. An influential friend, Lord Elster, had obtained the promise of an appointment for him there, and Mr. Kage was expecting the bona-fide offer daily. He thought perhaps this letter contained it; but he found he was mistaken; he would have to wait yet some days. Holding the letter still open when

read, for it must be replied to, he sat in doubt and deep reflection. Not in doubt as to whether the offer would come—of that he was as sure as he could be; but in doubt whether or not to accept it when it came. He had not made up his mind. In good truth, he was advancing so slowly in his profession—the case frequently with young barristers—that he had grown disheartened. He made enough to keep him and his moderate household in necessaries; and Lady Kage, as may be remembered, had provided for a year's rent; but of prospects he seemed to have none. The salary of the Indian appointment would commence at seven hundred a-year, and go on increasing. Had there been no one in the question but himself, he would not have hesitated one moment over the decision—to reject it. To go to India, or to any other country, for an indefinite number of years, would seem to him no better than banishment. Some men like to go a-roving; he did not. He loved his own country; he loved his profession, and looked forward to rising in it in time. In time—there was the difficulty. For there existed something that he loved better than all—Caroline Kage. If he remained at home, there appeared little chance of his ever telling that love. He could not expect her to wait years and years, until fortune came to him; or, if she would, her mother would certainly not allow her to do it. But if he closed with this offer to go to the East when it should be made, he thought he might without breach of honour ask her to go with him. That she loved him with her whole being he knew. Had he doubted before, her conduct at Easter, when he was at Chilling, was sufficient to show it to him. His heart was at rest; a soft glow stole across his thin cheeks, a tender light into his eyes, in thinking of her. Even now, as he sat there, his every pulse was beating with happiness. It is true, she had not written to him once since Easter; but he knew the fault lay with Mrs. Kage. Oh, if she—if they—should deem this Indian project worth entering upon! And he might take her out with him, his wife! He fully believed it might be so. And Thomas Kage began to pen an answer to the letter in his hand, the whole world, to his entranced sight, seeming to be flooded with a brilliant atmosphere.

CHAPTER VIII.

A TERRIBLE FEAR.

A SUNNY day in June. In the sweet summer-room facing the north, so grateful to the sight and senses in blazing weather, sat the four daughters of George Canterbury. Mrs. Dunn was in deep black robes and a widow's cap. The others had assumed slight mourning, and wore muslins.

It was some days now since Mrs. Dunn had arrived at the Rock, purposing to make a long visit. They had been pressing her to do it ever since her husband's death, but the settlement of his affairs had kept her in town. She was left (as she considered) very badly off. Mr. Dunn, who was member for the county when Lydia Canterbury married him, was not a rich man. He had something to do with iron; his wife never took the trouble to ascertain precisely what; and a great portion of his interest in the business, whatever it might be, went from him at his death. Mrs. Dunn would have about twelve or fourteen hundred a-year; it was nothing compared with what she expected to inherit from her father, nothing to the fabulous wealth of the Rock. So Lydia Dunn considered herself hardly used by Fortune, and wondered how she should exist. She was several years younger than her sister Olive, and a plain likeness of her. A less tall figure, and without Olive's majesty, with more than a tendency to plumpness, which Olive had not. Her hair was of the same dark, beautiful shade; her features wanted the refined grace of Olive's, while they displayed the resolution. Mrs. Dunn was positive, outspoken, very fond of domineering; Olive, quietly resolute, was full of gracious courtesy. Rumour went—it was impossible to know whether it spoke truth—that Mr. Dunn had ventured to address Miss Canterbury first, and, upon finding out his mistake, had transferred his hopes to Lydia. Whether that might have been the case or not, one fact was certain—Lydia knew nothing of it. If anything had passed, it was confined to Miss Canterbury's own breast, and Lydia married Mr. Dunn in peace. The very

large fortune to which the Miss Canterburys were heiresses caused them to be marks for suitors—great prizes to be shot for. High and low alike cast a longing eye on them; but the consciousness that this must inevitably be the case caused the Miss Canterburys to be exceedingly inaccessible. It was not that they would have made their riches a bar, but the fear lest those riches were the attraction, and not themselves, lay more or less upon their minds always. Fifteen curates in all, during the last half-dozen years, had laid themselves and their gowns at the feet of one or other of the heiresses at the Rock—worthy men, no doubt, but not quite free from suspicion as to motives. Jane and Leta were wont to wish, to some extent in earnest, that they had been born portionless.

The window was thrown open to the steady north landscape lying around in its beauty, with its subdued light, its welcome shade. On this side the park was not extensive—a mere strip—and beyond it lay the green fields that would lead by a cross-road to Aberton. At the end of this first field—a large one, and divided by a fence, with a stile in the middle—was situated the dwelling of Mrs. Kage. June roses, lilies, sweet-scented flowers, threw up their perfume from the beds immediately underneath the windows, imbuing the atmosphere of the room with sweetness. It was the young ladies' favourite sitting-room. Not a show room by any means, though the pictures on the delicately-papered walls were valuable, and the furniture was of costly green-and-gold; but rather an *undress* room, in which they worked and read and played and talked, and might make an untidy litter at will.

Olive and Jane were busy to-day—the one cutting out work for the charity-school, the other tacking the pieces together. Staid, steady, well-conducted ladies, the Miss Canterburys directed the schools judiciously, and other parish benefits, of which they were the chief supporters. Mrs. Dunn sat back in an easy-chair near the window, doing nothing, as usual—all the industry she possessed lay in her tongue; and Millicent was at the piano trying a new piece very softly and quietly.

"That is wrong, I am sure, Leta." It was Mrs. Dunn who spoke, in the quick abrupt way very usual with her. She was the only really good musician of the family. Her taste for it

was innate, and something or other in the playing had grated on her correct ear.

Leta played to the end of the page, and then rose from the piano. Conscious of her own inferior skill, she did not often care to try new pieces before Mrs. Dunn.

"I have played an hour," she remarked, "and Olive tells me that is quite long enough at one time." Going to a writing-table, Leta opened one of the desks there, her own, with the intention of beginning a letter to Miss Annesley. Putting the writing-paper before her, she suddenly remembered that some information concerning parish interests, which Sarah had asked for, was not yet obtained. "Oh dear! I can't write until to-morrow," cried Leta. "Lydia, what sort of people are they where she has gone?"

"Where who has gone?" naturally demanded Mrs. Dunn, who could not be supposed to see into her sister's thoughts.

"Sarah Annesley."

"I don't know what you mean by 'sort.' Mrs. Annesley is a widow, with a flighty young daughter. Quite middle-class people, living quietly with three maid-servants in Paradise Terrace—near to old Mrs. Garston's, you know. They are rather friendly with her."

"I wish Mrs. Garston had invited Sarah," spoke Leta, earnestly. "She might as well have done so. She took a wonderful liking for her when we were at Little Bay last autumn. Middle-class people! I don't suppose Sarah will be very happy there."

"Now don't run away with wrong notions, Miss Millicent," sharply enjoined Mrs. Dunn. "The Annesleys are gentle-people. In calling them middle-class, I alluded to their moderate house and style of living. My late husband's brother, Richard Dunn, is intimate there. As to Sarah Annesley, she is not the first of us who has had to bend to adverse circumstances. Look at me, left with nothing a-year!"

Leta bent her face to hide a smile. Mrs. Dunn's grievance of her 'nothing a-year" had become a joke amongst the other sisters. Leta toyed with her writing-paper; it was tiresome to sit down to her desk, and then find that it was to no purpose.

"Olive," she said, looking up, "may I write a note to ask Caroline Kage here for the day?"

Miss Canterbury made no reply. She was puzzled over her work just then, counting pieces. Millicent deferred to her as she would to a mother.

"This is wrong, Jane. Nine pairs of sleeves, and only eight pairs of gussets: you must have miscounted. What was it you asked me, Leta?"

"If I may send for Caroline Kage."

"Caroline Kage is always here," interrupted Mrs. Dunn. "She was here to tea yesterday, and to luncheon the day before; and for the whole morning, with her mother, the day before that. You had better have her to live here, Millicent."

The words were delivered with so much resentment that Millicent looked at Mrs. Dunn in pure astonishment. Miss Canterbury, her interest buried in her work, did not notice the tone, though she heard the words.

"That is just what Millicent would like—to have her to live here, Lydia," Olive said, with a smile.

"Ah!" returned Lydia, flicking her broad-hemmed handkerchief at a wasp that seemed inclined to enter.

"Caroline Kage is very pleasant, Lydia; we all like her," put in Jane.

"A pretty, good-natured sort of girl; not much in her," somewhat slightingly remarked Miss Canterbury.

"If she were one of earth's young-lady angels, her constant intrusion would be irksome," returned Mrs. Dunn. "The Chinese have a proverb, 'Pay your visits only on alternate days, lest by continual going you weary your friends and they become estranged from you.' It is full of wisdom."

"Intrusion!" exclaimed Millicent, disregarding the proverb.

"Yes, intrusion," decisively repeated Mrs. Dunn.

"But, Lydia, we are pleased to have her."

Jane Canterbury lifted her scissors from the calico, and turned round to address Mrs. Dunn.

"The fact is, Lydia, they have grown thus intimate from Leta's want of other companions. We are older than she is, and have different interests. The Kages are our nearest neighbours, you know, and she and Caroline have been so

much together that an affection has sprung up between them."

Mrs. Dunn lost some of her angry look. "Ever the same, Jane; smoothing down difficulties for every one. But I do think it is time you left off that unmeaning word, 'Leta:' I assure you it does not contribute to Millicent's dignity."

"I don't think it does," smiled Jane. "But it is a long-used habit; just like the visits of Caroline Kage: and every-day habits are hard to relinquish."

"May I write, Olive?" resumed Millicent, who had sat pen in hand and paper before her, breaking the silence that had ensued.

Mrs. Dunn made a gesture of impatience; and her words, for she spoke before Olive, were impatiently uttered. "Caroline Kage is better where she is than here. Let her be."

"Yes, yes," decided Olive hastily, considering that Mrs. Dunn, both as a married woman and as a visitor, should be especially deferred to. "We will not have Caroline to-day, Millicent."

Millicent slowly closed her writing-desk, and then leaned her elbow upon it and her cheek upon her hand, her face plainly expressing disappointment. She was sincerely attached to Caroline: and it might be—it might be, that she hungered for a word of news of Thomas Kage. Never once, since that visit of his at Easter, when he had dined at the Rock, had his name passed Caroline's lips. Before that period she had been always speaking of him. Caroline herself had seemed changed since; the once light, trifling girl had become thoughtful and silent. Once, and once only, Leta had taken courage to ask after Mr. Kage: "We know nothing of him," was Caroline's short answer. The door opened, and Mr. Canterbury put his head in, as if asking permission to enter. The room belonged so exclusively to his daughters that he seemed to think he had no right in it uninvited. "Come in, papa."

There was a change in Mr. Canterbury. The head, growing so bald at the top, was now surmounted by an auburn wig of curly luxuriance, almost as natural as though it grew there. An eye-glass dangled on his waistcoat; his morning-clothes were cut in the most approved style of a fashionable London

tailor. In fact, Mr. Canterbury would have looked like a young dandy had he not been an old man.

"I think I shall ride into Aberton, Olive. Have you any commands?"

"Thank you, papa; no. Not this morning."

"Is your head better, Lydia?" he inquired of Mrs. Dunn, who had complained of headache at breakfast.

"It aches still, papa; I have had it a good deal lately. I think these hot caps help to give it to me," she added, pushing her widow's cap back on her head.

"Why do you wear them, then?"

"Oh, well, papa, you know it is the custom. Had I not followed it, people would have been found to say I had not cared for my husband."

"I should not let what such people could say trouble me," sensibly remarked Mr. Canterbury. "You look as if you had a headache, also," he added to Millicent, his gaze falling on her.

"No, I have not," said she, rousing herself, and rising from her seat.

"What's the matter, then?"

"Not much, papa."

"Not much! What is it?"

"I only felt disappointed," explained Leta, shortly, a little vexed at having to confess it.

"What at?" persisted Mr. Canterbury, who did not like to see his daughters' faces clouded, especially hers, who had been in a degree the plaything of them all.

"I wanted to write for Caroline Kage to come and spend the day here, and Olive will not let me."

"Caroline Kage is here too much; she inundates us," sharply interrupted Mrs. Dunn, in a voice of authority. "Not a day since I came home have we been free from Caroline Kage. Seven days I have been here, and seven visits, some of them lasting for hours, we have had of that girl's. It is unreasonable."

There was a pause; Mr. Canterbury broke it. Leta, feeling uncomfortable at having caused the unpleasantness, went and stood at the window.

"Why do you dislike her, Lydia?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't dislike her, papa," returned Mrs. Dunn, suppressing her irritation badly; "but I consider that she is here too much."

"Here is Caroline herself, coming up!" exclaimed Millicent.

Miss Kage was advancing underneath the window then: they heard her voice as she looked up and spoke to Leta. Mr. Canterbury, about to quit the room, turned with his hand on the door.

"Then, as she is here, you can ask her to stay for the day," he said, looking at Olive. "Why not? I do not like to see Millicent with a sad face," he concluded, as if accounting for his decision.

Mr. Canterbury met Miss Kage in the hall, and two or three minutes elapsed before she came to the room—alone; a remarkably pretty girl this morning, in her pink-muslin dress, and a white bonnet as light and airy as herself.

"You have come to save us the trouble of sending for you, Caroline," spoke Millicent, forgetting vexation in the exuberance of her spirits. "We want you to remain the day."

"I cannot remain ten minutes," replied Miss Kage. "Many thanks all the same."

"Oh, I am so sorry!" exclaimed Millicent. "Ten minutes, Caroline! Where was the use of your coming at all?"

"I came for mamma. She has had one of those tiresome letters again, and sent me with it to Mr. Canterbury. I have given it to him."

"But why can you not remain?"

"Because my cousin has just arrived on one of his flying visits, and I must go back home."

"What cousin?" asked Olive.

"Thomas Kage."

"Caroline," said Jane, archly, "I fancy that cousin of yours has some other motive than cousinship in these flying visits of his."

Miss Kage tossed her head; she had caught Jane's meaning aptly. It was some weeks now since she had resolved to put old feelings behind her, to regard them as though they had never been. "What an idea, Miss Jane! Certainly not.

Thomas Kage is grave as a judge, and poor as a church-mouse. You are quite wrong. As if I would encourage *him!*"

The vivid blush rising to her face faded to a death-like paleness. Leta Canterbury, shaded by the curtain, saw it, and wondered.

"You might tolerate a worse," said Mrs. Dunn, in her strong tones, the first words she had spoken. "Thomas Kage is one of the worthiest of created men."

"Is he?" rejoined Caroline, with a painful effort to be careless. "He is very poor."

"I don't care whether he is poor or rich; you'll not find another like him, search the world through."

Olive turned round. She could not understand her sister Lydia this morning, and felt thoroughly ashamed of her rudeness. "Will you spend to-morrow with Leta, my dear?" she said pleasantly to Caroline.

"Yes, thank you, Miss Canterbury. I shall be very glad."

She wished them good morning, and departed. Leta went to the end of the room, and began to sort some silks for her embroidery. Olive and Jane remained at their useful work over the table.

"What brought her up with that letter?" abruptly cried Mrs. Dunn, turning her chair from the window, so as to face her sisters.

Their surprise increased. Lydia had always been fond of setting the world to rights, and interfering in what did not concern her; but this turn of mind was something new.

"Caroline said Mrs. Kage sent her with the letter," replied Jane, meekly. "Poor Mrs. Kage has had some troublesome law-business to contend with lately, and papa advises her upon it, Lydia."

"Law-business!" retorted Lydia, with an angry scoff.

"Law-business of some nature: I don't understand it. How lovely Caroline looked this morning!"

"And how well she dresses!" remarked Olive. "Those lace-sleeves were real Brussels. I wonder how they manage it."

"I mean, what brought *her* up with it?" continued Mrs. Dunn, tapping her foot with impatience. "Why could Mrs. Kage not have sent it by a servant?"

"I dare say Caroline was glad to bring it herself. What has put you out, Lydia?"

Mrs. Dunn did not say. She took up a book and began to read. But she seemed to grow restless: now turning the leaves forward, now backward, as if her mind or her temper would not get right again.

"I have no green of the proper shade," cried Leta, looking up from her silks. "May I go out for it, Olive?"

"Where to?—Chilling? You would never get it there."

"I think I might; it is the dark green. At least, I can try, Olive, if you have no objection."

"None at all. You can carry some of this work to the school at the same time."

A small bundle was made up, and given to Leta when she came in with her things on. Mrs. Dunn, whose restlessness seemed on the increase, presently flung her book down, and stood at the window, fanning her hot and angry face. Suddenly she put up her hands to shade her eyes, as if looking at something, and then turned with a hasty movement to open the doors of an ornamental cabinet.

"Where is the glass that used to be kept here?"

"The small telescope, do you mean, Lydia? Poor Edgar took it out with him one day just before he died, and lost it."

"The large one, then?"

"Oh—that? I don't know where that is," slowly added Miss Canterbury. "Somewhere in papa's possession, I fancy."

"The house seems quite upset since I left it—nothing to be found," muttered Mrs. Dunn, taking up her post at the window again. "As to me, I am more near-sighted than ever."

"Did you want to discern anything?" asked Jane, kindly leaving her seat to join Mrs. Dunn. "Perhaps I can see it for you."

"Look at those two in the distance, leaning—as it seems to me—on a stile, and talking. Is not one of them papa?"

"Yes," said Jane, casting her strong sight towards the spot. "Papa and—yes, and Caroline Kage. I can see her pink dress. He has gone after her, I dare say, to send a message to her mother about the letter."

"And perhaps to repeat my invitation for to-morrow," added Olive, "though he does not know of it."

"Or to inquire why she cannot remain to-day," said Jane, returning to her work. "Papa is ever thinking for us."

"You blind geese! you simple women!" exclaimed Mrs. Dunn, in an accent of earnestness so impassioned that they dropped what they held, and gazed at her in startled alarm. "Is it possible that your eyes and understanding have been closed?" she continued, flinging herself back in the armchair. "Olive, where have yours been? Jane is meek and unsuspicious; Millicent is young; but you! Olive, are you quite blind, quite oblivious to what is going on?"

"What *is* going on?" demanded Olive, when her astonishment allowed her to speak.

"It is a sin and a shame that you should need to ask."

Olive Canterbury felt just a little aggrieved at being thus called to account by her younger sister; she, the efficient mistress of the Rock. She waited to draw a thread in the linen, and then spoke with calm impassivity. "What is it that you detect amiss? I look closely after the household in all requisite things."

"More closely than you will look in future; more closely than you will have the opportunity of doing. You will not be long the house's mistress."

"Indeed!" said Olive.—"Jane, give me the large scissors."

"Olive! Olive! you are treating me as if I were a simpleton. Jane, put down that wretched work, and listen; I am in earnest. I say that Olive will not much longer be here as ruler."

She did seem in earnest. Nevertheless, they thought her intellects must be wandering. Jane let her delicate hands drop idly on the work. Her ideas had taken a curious turn: she could only think the words applied to Olive's possible death.

"What is it that you are fearing, Lydia? Olive is quite well. She always looks pale in hot weather."

"Oh, you—you idiots!" returned Mrs. Dunn, wringing her hands; "was there ever blindness like unto yours? It is not with Olive that there's anything the matter, but your father. He is turning foolish in his old age. He is going to place a mistress over you."

They were, indeed, blindly unsuspicious. "A mistress!" slowly repeated Miss Canterbury, not yet understanding.

"Yes, a mistress; for the house and for you. A second wife."

A pause of moments: it needed that, to take in the sense of the words. Jane's face, generally so calm, became painfully agitated. Olive turned red with indignation. Her well-balanced mind refused to believe a word of the assertion. "Lydia, I did not think you were capable of saying this."

"But if it be true? And I tell you that it *is* true. Your father has fixed upon a second wife as surely as that we are sitting here."

"Of whom can you be thinking?" asked Miss Canterbury, slightly perplexed, as her thoughts went out to the neighbourhood and home again. "Of Mrs. Kage?"

"No. I wish it were: it would be the lesser evil of the two. It is the girl—Caroline."

"Oh, Lydia!" was simultaneously uttered, in resentful incredulity.

Mrs. Dunn rose from her seat again: she seized Olive with one hand, Jane with the other, and drew them towards the window. "Are they gone? No, not yet. I can see the figures, indistinct figures to me. To Jane they are plain enough; perhaps to you, also, Olive. They are talking still."

"And if they are," said angry Olive, "what does that prove? If papa chooses to stand talking to a child, and to talk all day long, what is there in that?"

"Not much—in that alone: he might so stand talking to me or to you. You have no need to be angry with me, Olive: you will find it too true. I had my suspicions aroused the very first day of my return."

The bare idea in itself, apart from its possible truth, was exceedingly unpleasant and unpalatable; it might not be too much to say repulsive. In spite of their hitherto complete unconsciousness, a miserable feeling arose in either heart, as they stood looking at the figures in the distance.

"A child like Caroline Kage!" remonstrated Miss Canterbury, determined to combat to the end.

"There's the worst of the evil—a child," said Mrs. Dunn. "Had he married one of his own age, or near to it, it would not have been so bad for us; it would have been more seemly in every way. Though what on earth he can want to marry at all for, after being a widower all these years, I cannot tell."

Jane's eyes were full of tears. "It is not likely that it can be true, Lydia; it is not probable. How can you have formed so strange a notion?"

"Just as you might have formed it, had scales not been upon your eyes. The most extraordinary events take place under people's noses every day, and they cannot see them. This was your case. I came fresh into the house, with my eyes and understanding open, and I saw it all."

"Saw what? What is there to see?" persisted Miss Canterbury, in as irritable a tone as Mrs. Dunn herself might have used—she, the ever-gracious woman.

"Various little points, which, taken together, make an ominous whole," was the answer. "Though you might say that this was nothing, and that was nothing, looked at separately."

The figures at the stile had parted now, and Mr. Canterbury was on his way back again. Some other gentleman, who had come up to the spot, was walking on with Caroline.

"When I arrived here a week ago, and papa came out to the carriage to me, I was so struck by his appearance, that for a moment I could not greet him," said Mrs. Dunn. "Where was there so negligent a man in regard to dress as he used to be? He had on a white waistcoat; his white wristbands were displayed; and an eye-glass hung from an invisible chain. When did he ever put on a white waistcoat in the daytime? or show the ghost of a wristband? or discard his spectacles for an eye-glass?"

"I think he took to showing his wristbands when he was in mourning for Edgar," interposed Jane.

"I don't care when he took to showing them. Not then; or, if he did, he left it off again: it is a new thing now. Everything's new about him, and it must have a purpose," argued Mrs. Dunn. There was a most uncomfortable silence. "And his wig!" resumed Mrs. Dunn. "Was there ever such a dandified thing seen? Look at it!"

"The top of his head was getting so bald: that's why he took to a wig," spoke Jane, in low tones.

"Rubbish!" said Mrs. Dunn. "He would no more have cared for his bald head, when there was only you to look at it, than he'd have cared for flying. Have it, if you like, that he did wish for a wig: need he have gone and bought a thing only fit for a revolving dummy in a hairdresser's window—a top-knot of perfumed curls!"

"We did say it was too young for papa, the first morning he came down to breakfast in it," murmured Jane.

"He has had his three teeth put in," pursued Mrs. Dunn.

"They were out," said Jane.

"They had been out almost as long as I can remember; certainly before mamma died. Why should he have taken a sudden freak to have them put in now, after all these years? He'll be putting rouge on his cheeks next: they say some men do it."

"Lydia, I will not have you speak so of your father," reproved Olive, her feelings stung to the quick.

"Very well; I'll let him alone. Turn to Caroline Kage. Do you suppose she comes here, so persistently, for you girls?—dresses up her pretty face in smiles for your benefit? Why does papa stand by when she is singing? Why does he laugh, and joke, and whisper—I have seen him whispering to her—and why does he walk home with her in an evening, as he nearly always does?"

"I believe that he has only paid her these attentions as he might pay them to any other child—paid them partly because she is a child," stoutly spoke Olive.

"Has he?" sarcastically retorted Mrs. Dunn.

"It never occurred to me to think otherwise, Lydia."

"Well, does it occur to you now—now that the clue has been given?"

Miss Canterbury did not answer. The clue, as Mrs. Dunn called it, was forcing its way to terrible conviction, in spite of her assumption of disbelief. Jane felt wretched, and stood with a blank face of distress.

"That you have helped this on, perhaps even led to it wholly, by having her here so much, is certain," said Mrs. Dunn,

with the air of one who has received a deep injury. "How you could have been so obtuse I cannot imagine; when the very first hour I saw them together was enough for me."

"You have had so much more experience than we have; you have been out in the world," urged Jane, deprecatingly. "And I think, Lydia, that being married must tend to enlarge the understanding in regard to experience of mankind."

"It just does," emphatically pronounced Mrs. Dunn; "if you mean as to their tricks and turns. As long as we are girls at home, the men seem to us like so many saints, who could not go wrong if they were paid for it; but that delusion wears off uncommonly quickly, I can tell you, when we go out amongst them. I don't complain of *my* late husband; he was a good one personally; but I learnt a little as to men in general."

How all this grated on the ears of Miss Canterbury, she alone could have told. Not for many a long year had such a burden of dread taken up its seat within her.

"Oh, Lydia, I trust—I trust you are mistaken!" escaped from her full heart. "Or at least, if not, that the mischief may be averted."

"Mistaken I am not, Olive; but as to averting it, that's another thing. I do not say matters have gone so far as to prevent that," continued Mrs. Dunn, somewhat qualifying her former hasty words. "Papa has an idea in his head, for certain, as to Caroline Kage; but he may not commit himself to irredeemable folly."

"Here he is, coming through the gate," observed Jane. They looked at him, one and all, as he turned in from the park to the grounds and bore round for the front of the house, where his groom was waiting with the horses, withdrawing themselves a little from the window as they gazed. Mr. Canterbury was presented to their view in a new and curious aspect. Not but that *he* was the same; only their ideas in regard to him had undergone a change.

"God help us all, if it should be so!" fervently aspirated Olive under her breath.

Oh wily Mrs. Kage! It was she who had brought about this undesirable condition of things; for Lydia Dunn was not

mistaken. Coming fresh upon the scene, with all her wits about her, vividly open to all impressions, she had seen what the lookers-on had failed to detect even by the smallest suspicion. Casting about for a desirable establishment for her daughter, Mrs. Kage had laid covetous eyes on the Rock. It is true it had its disadvantages—she could not conceal that from herself; but think of its wealth! Mr. Canterbury had long left sixty behind him, and his grown-up children, all of them older than Caroline, were fixtures in the house. But with a fortune such as his, what might not be overlooked? she mentally argued. Certainly all minor difficulties. And if Caroline could only be persuaded—— At this point of her weaving, Mrs. Kage invariably lost the thread.

The web was begun and grew. Perhaps Mrs. Kage and Mr. Canterbury went in for nearly an equal share in its work; though the lady was undoubtedly the primary originator, and set it a-weaving. Fortune sometimes favours these schemes, as if the goddess herself were an arch-plotter: and it was the case here. Mrs. Kage fell into some legal difficulty, touching a sum of money sought to be charged upon the very small property she had inherited from her sister. Thomas Kage would have been the proper man to apply to—he could have set it right in no time; but Mrs. Kage shrank from his very name; for that Caroline was wilful enough to care for him as she would never care for any one else, Mrs. Kage had become convinced of at Easter. No; any one rather than him; and Mrs. Kage contrived to find another, and to kill two birds with one stone. She consulted Mr. Canterbury. That gentleman, possessing about as much legal acumen as one of the deer in his own park, but considering himself equal to the best lawyer going, was both ready and willing to be consulted, and went into the affair with energy. It involved many visits to Mrs. Kage, where he was always thrown amidst the fascinations of Caroline, who was not slow to exercise them. It involved return visits to Mr. Canterbury; letters to be shown, fresh thoughts and fears to be verbally told; and Caroline was generally chosen as messenger. This bore rapid fruit. When elderly gentlemen fall into an attachment of this kind, they generally do it in a great hurry, as if time were coming to an end before the year were out; and

Mr. Canterbury served as an exemplification of this. Caroline was as wise as he. Before the man had advanced farther than thinking her a sweet, lovable, charming girl, and showing in manner that he thought it, she saw the end that was to supervene. If she did not positively encourage his admiration, she certainly never repelled it; but she saw it needed no specific encouragement. In the coquetry of a light-minded woman—and Caroline had it and exercised it in abundance—she was content to be made covert love to, to feed Mr. Canterbury's growing dreams, and to let the future take care of itself. Whether she should accept Mr. Canterbury, when the time came for decision, and become mistress of the Rock and its wide revenues; or whether she should laugh prettily, and stare at him with wide-open eyes of wondering simplicity while she rejected him, Caroline was unable to foresee, and did not care to think about. Ever and anon a vision came over her of Thomas Kage's making his unexpected appearance at Chilling, with the news that he had dropped into a large fortune through some old relative or friend (Mrs. Garston, say) who had conveniently died, and asking her, Caroline, to share it with him. So wildly would her bosom throb with its momentary rapture, that she had to press her hands there.

CHAPTER IX.

SUNSHINE GONE OUT FOR EVER.

THE advance portion of Caroline Kage's delusive dream was suddenly realized. Between ten and eleven o'clock on a brilliant June morning—the one mentioned in the last chapter—Thomas Kage walked in. Caroline's heart leaped within her. In her tumultuous joy, she could scarcely believe his appearance a reality. And Mrs. Kage's spirits went down in about an equal proportion. Mr. Canterbury's attentions had become so palpable, that Mrs. Kage thought some clamax must be at hand, or ought to be. Letters touching her law-business arrived conveniently quickly: one that same morning.

She had been telling Caroline to take it up to Mr. Canterbury, and what to say about it, when they were thus broken in upon by Thomas Kage. Mrs. Kage was struck into a state of dismay at the unwelcome interruption, as she thought of the mischief it might work to the smooth on-flow of existing things. In answer to her short questions, he said he had taken the night-train down to Aberton; and he said no more. Mrs. Kage inwardly wished the train had buried itself in some dangerous cutting en route, and him with it.

"Business at Aberton, I suppose, as usual," she observed, resentfully.

"No; I had no business at Aberton this time," was Mr. Kage's answer.

"You must have had a warm walk from there."

"Not very. It is an exceedingly delightful morning, Mrs. Kage, with a pleasant breeze.—Will you come out with me presently, and try it?" he added pointedly to Caroline.

She said neither yes nor no. His coming down had put her into a perplexing state of indecision. *Was* that vision of hers about to be realized? Had fortune come to him? Quite accidentally, Mrs. Kage caused the question to be solved.

"Are you getting on well in your profession?"

"Not well; very slowly," he answered. "In fact, so slowly, that I am not sure but I shall give it up, and try my luck in another line."

Caroline listened. She could have laughed a bitter laugh at her own fond folly. And that fair, hopeful dream, as connected with fortune and Thomas Kage, flew abruptly away for ever.

Getting the letter into her possession, she put on her prettiest bonnet, and contrived to quit the house unseen. Something in his manner, when he had asked her to go out with him, imparted to her an almost certain conviction that he wanted to speak of his love. In these matters, there is a language not to be misunderstood; and Caroline would fain shun the interview. But she did not dare remain long at the Rock, lest he should come in search of her This he did. Whilst she and Mr. Canterbury stood together at the stile in close converse, Thomas Kage walked across the field and joined them. Vexed at the inopportune interruption, Mr. Canterbury was rather

short with the young barrister, in spite of his real liking for him, and turned homeward again after a shake of the hand and a few words.

"Why did you not tell me you were going to the Rock, Caroline?" began Mr. Kage, as he assisted her over the stile, and they proceeded onwards. "I would have walked with you."

In defiance of the warm love that glowed within her, tingling her pulses, flushing her cheeks, Caroline Kage steeled her heart against him. The very effort to do it—the consciousness that it must be done—rendered her manner cold, abrupt, and petulant.

"That is just why I did not tell you," she said. "I wanted to go alone."

"Will you take my arm?"

"No, thank you. It's not the fashion to take arms in this part of the world."

"It was, the last time I was down here. Do you remember our moonlight walk over these same paths? And I think you were just now leaning on Mr. Canterbury's."

"But he is so very close a friend."

"And I am your cousin."

"A great many degrees removed," she said, with a little nervous laugh.

"The more the better, Caroline, in one point of view. What a beau he is getting!"

"Who is?"

"Old Canterbury. He is ten years younger, to look at, than he was two months ago. What has he been doing to himself?"

"How came you to pay us a visit to-day, and to come without sending word?" quickly inquired Caroline, as if anxious to pass over the subject of Mr. Canterbury's looks.

"I came to see you, Caroline."

"Oh!" she slightingly said, wishing she had wings and could fly away. "I thought you always had business at Aberton. Don't say any more about it; I would rather not know."

"First of all, I wish to tell you some news, Caroline," he

continued quietly; "and then I would ask your advice. I have had a post offered me in India, and I am deliberating whether it will or will not be worth my while to give up the law and accept it. The commencing salary would be seven hundred a-year; they rise, they say, tolerably rapid. In six or seven years from this it might be fifteen hundred—rather more than doubled."

"You do not make seven hundred a-year in London?"

"Nothing like it; I wish I did; there would be no question then of my leaving it. This year I expect to make about three hundred, all told."

"Then I should go to India," she said, with animation. "You may never have such a chance thrown in your way again. Accept it at once, without hesitation. I should start by the next mail."

"Should you? Is that your deliberate advice?"

"Yes."

"I could not go alone, Caroline."

The moment was coming. She hated it very much, simply because she knew she should be false both to him and herself. Her face took a white hue.

"If I can—can induce one to go out with me, my loving companion, and share my fortunes, then I will go. Otherwise, I stay and fight out my fate in England."

Caroline Kage did not answer. Her manner and face had grown cold as a stone. He resumed, turning on her his good honest eyes, speaking in low, steady, tender tones.

"A great hope has lain within me for several months now; in fact, since that sojourn at the seaside last year. You and I have met twice since then, and with each time it has grown brighter and surer. I did not speak of it; while my future was so doubtful, it was impossible to do so in honour. Neither did I betray it by so much as a look—at least, not willingly: in these cases there generally lies a tacit understanding, arising one knows not how nor whence, and I think you have understood me. When this post was first placed at my disposal, my impulse was to reject it. But I considered it well; and I saw that it might present a solution to what seemed a hard fate—prolonged, interminable waiting—if you also could be brought

to regard it, with your mother's approbation, in the same light. And so I determined to lay the case before you, and ask you, Caroline, to go out to India with me."

She was a little agitated, opening her lips to speak and closing them again abruptly. Her colour went and came.

"I wish you to understand fully, before deciding, Caroline. Not for worlds would I induce you to take a step that might result afterwards in disappointment. Therefore try and realize what I am about to say. You have, I presume, some notion of the relative value of money—of what seven hundred a-year may imply, as to ways and means. Your mother's income is, I believe, just five hundred per annum; mine will be seven; but then money goes less far in India than at home. I should start with a few hundreds in hand, and my salary will have a yearly increase. We should have quite enough for comfort, a little for very moderate luxury." He paused, but received no answer. "Would the companion venture with me?"

"No," she answered. And her tone was low and cold. "No."

A change, like a blight, passed over his features. "Think again, Caroline," he said, after a pause. "Reflect upon it, and give me an answer later in the day."

"There is no necessity. I should only say what I do now —No."

In perfect silence they walked on some yards. Caroline suddenly quickened her pace as though she would have left him. He put out his hand to stop her.

"Caroline, have you fully understood me?"

"I imagine so; I am quite sure so. Quite fully."

"And you reject me?"

"Don't be silly. Reject! Well, then—yes; if you will have an answer. Cousins we are, and cousins we must remain; nothing more."

"I have waited long to say this; I could not speak without some such justification as that which now offers. You have misled me, Caroline."

"What will you say next? If there has been any misleading in the matter, it must have been in your fancy."

"You have misled me, and you know it," he reiterated, too

earnest to heed the signs of his own agitation. "You have been misleading me all along."

"Tom, I have not. I dread poverty, and should never marry to encounter it, so how could I mislead you? Don't make a spectacle of yourself. I hate scenes, especially in an open field."

"I am not one to make a spectacle of myself," he rejoined, with sufficient calmness; "but—I must repeat it—you have *cruelly* misled me. Do you forget that when I was last here, you——"

"Yes, I forget all about it, and I don't wish to remember," she heartlessly interrupted. "Why, I'd rather be turned into that glove of yours than wed myself to poverty."

"Do you call the income I have described poverty?

"Of course I do; dreadful poverty to marry upon. Where's the good of marrying at all, if you are to be no better off than before? Seven hundred a-year, indeed! It would not half keep me in dress."

"Upon what income, then, would you marry?"

"Upon as many thousands. Not a fraction under."

Partly from the agitation that the moment brought to her, so that she scarcely knew what she said or did, partly because she felt herself in a dilemma, which half frightened her, her manner and words were alike repellent, while her heart was silently beating with its love. But for a golden vista already dazzling her worldly eyes, Caroline Kage might have been true to love and herself, and gone out with him. That she *had* led him to hope in an unmistakable manner, that she was using him miserably ill, her mind was as conscious of as his. Thomas Kage struggled to be his own calm self, and if his countenance betrayed its sense of wrong, he did not speak it; and thus walking side by side in silence, each with a beating heart, they reached the gate. Caroline would have passed in hurriedly.

"Surely you will not leave me thus!" he said, with emotion. "Do you know what you are doing for me?—that my life henceforth will be a blighted one?"

"I am very sorry; I hope you will soon forget me, Tom," she answered, her voice a little softening. "The sooner the better."

"What if I were to tell you that you are heartless?

Heartless she certainly was not, in respect of having loved him. But she knew the safer plan now was to appear so. "I cannot help it, if you do. You should never have thought of me or come near me, knowing your prospects were what they are. How was *I* to know?"

"Then it is not *me* you would reject, but my want of sufficient income? Let me lay the case before Mrs. Kage, and see if she considers it an insuperable bar."

"I would advise you not to do so. It would be waste of time. Knowing my mother as you do, you must be aware that, far from persuading me to marry upon a small income, she would be the first to prevent me. That is not to the purpose, however. Were she even to urge me to accept you for my husband, I should answer her as I have answered you —I will not."

"So, hope is to go out for me thus; now, and for evermore!"

"Hope never ought to have existed. Unless you could offer me a suitable home, with carriages and court-dresses and opera-boxes and all that, you might have had better sense than to think of me. Thomas, I cannot help saying it."

"Does happiness lie in court-dresses and opera-boxes, think you, Caroline?" he sadly asked, his pale face made paler by contrast with the green laurels.

"Yes, of course. *I* cannot do without them. What is more, I shall never be induced to try."

"Oh, Caroline, my love, let me pray you not to deceive yourself. I speak for your own sake. These things, unless your heart can be with him who gives them, will turn out but mocking shadows."

"Never; for me. I was born to pomp and state on my mother's side, as you know. Though they have not been mine yet, I shall not love them less when they come."

"God forgive you, Caroline, for playing me false. You *know* how you have led me on from the first, and what your manner has been to me. The sunshine of my life goes out with you."

"Nonsense!"

"That you may never repent this day is my earnest wish;

but I cannot help saying that you will, in all probability, live to recall it with pain. A woman cannot heartlessly jilt a man, as you are about to jilt me, without its pressing sometimes unpleasantly on her memory. I will try and bear in silence, wishing you no ill-will, rather praying ever that God shall bless you."

She ran indoors for safety, her eyes filling with tears as she went, in manner repellent to the last. It was well to go: had she stayed another moment, she might have fallen on his bosom in repentance. Thomas Kage looked after her with yearning eyes. It had been the turning-point in his life: the turn which so many must pass and survive: all green behind, bright hopeful green, as a meadow in spring; all grey henceforward, a dull, cheerless, leaden grey. One word of his had been apt: if ever man was jilted in this world, he had been by Caroline Kage. Luncheon was on the table when he entered, and Mrs. Kage in the fidgets. She would willingly have chained him by the legs, rather than that he should be lingering in the verdant fields, in the sweet summer air, with Caroline.

That young lady, gone upstairs to take off her bonnet, came down with a serene, unconscious face. Mrs. Kage approached the table, and put up her eye-glass.

"Cold lamb!" she said. "Will you save me the trouble of carving, Thomas? And mind you make a good luncheon: it must be many hours since you breakfasted."

He did as he was told: carved; and made a good luncheon, or appeared to do so: Mrs. Kage was not one to take much notice, and Caroline seemed occupied with her own plate. The conversation turned on general subjects; partly upon Mrs. Garston; upon Sarah Annesley and her new home in London; but not a word did he say further of himself or his affairs. When the tray was removed, and Mrs. Kage had resumed her sofa, her fan, and her essence-bottles, he approached her to say farewell.

"Are you going now?" cried Mrs. Kage.

"I must, indeed."

"I understood you to say that you might stay for dinner."

He had said something of the sort—anticipating a different answer from Caroline. The night train had brought him

down; the next night train he had intended should convey him back. He would take the first that started now. "I am anxious to get back to town: this is a busy time at Westminster. And now that I have seen you and Caroline——"

He did not finish his sentence—if it had any finish. A shake of Mrs. Kage's delicate hand, faded like her face, and then he turned to Caroline. "Am I to say farewell?"

So he had not given up hope, even then? The low tone, was full of meaning, the eyes went questioningly out into the depths of hers. Only for a moment. She turned them away with a hard coldness, and put out her hand with a grudging air.

"Good-bye, Thomas. I wish you a pleasant journey." Was it said in mockery? No, but he verily thought it. The front-door closed after him, and next the gate between the laurels.

"There never was any comprehending him," said Mrs. Kage, languidly refreshing her face with eau-de-Cologne. "Fancy his coming all that immense distance, and travelling all night, to stay only an hour!"

How long Caroline remained motionless at the window, straining her eyes on the gate Mr. Kage had passed through, she heeded not. If the sunshine, as he said, had gone out of his heart, bitterly conscious was she that it had equally gone out of hers. In his departure, in the miserable certainty that he and she were finally divided for ever, there came a revulsion of feeling. Perhaps for a few moments Caroline saw things in their true colours, shorn of fancy, and discerned the superiority and worth of the man she had thrown away. But for its utter fruitlessness, she might have stretched out her repentant arms with the cry that had once before broken from her lips: "Oh, my love, my love, come back to me!"

"Have you lost your hearing, Caroline?" demanded Mrs. Kage. "I asked you what could have brought the young man down on this flying visit? He confessed he had no business at Aberton this time."

The direct questions recalled Caroline to existing things. She roused herself, but did not answer.

"He certainly said at first he should be happy to remain to dinner," pursued Mrs. Kage. "Not that I wanted him, I'm

sure. It is quite disagreeable to possess a sixteenth cousin, unhappily of the same name, who takes the liberty of popping in upon you at all hours and seasons—this is the third time he has come here. But, having come, why has he gone flying back again in so great a hurry?"

"I believe it is through me that he has gone," said Caroline in low tones, for she wished to make a clean breast of it, and of something else besides. "I offended him, and it sent him away."

"How was that?" asked Mrs. Kage, putting on that indifferent drawl in which she was an adept. "Adjust this cushion at my feet, will you, Caroline?"

"He has had a place in India offered to him," said Caroline, sinking her voice and disregarding the cushion. "He said he would accept it if I would go out with him."

"What is the value of it?" eagerly responded Mrs. Kage, as she leaned forward, forgetting her languor in glowing visions of lakhs upon lakhs of rupees.

"Seven hundred a-year."

Mrs. Kage fell back again. "Oh!"

"Seven hundred to begin with, and rising year by year up to fifteen. He thought it right to warn me that money does not go far in India."

"Well?" said Mrs. Kage, sharply, in the pause made by Caroline.

"I ridiculed it, mamma."

"What else should you do, child? That's well. I always thought Thomas Kage a fool; he has just proved himself one." Caroline took up a ball of cotton and tossed it gently and dreamily, as though her thoughts were far away. Mrs. Kage drew her white shawl over her shoulders, and resumed.

"Did you see Mr. Canterbury this morning?"

"Yes; and left the letter with him. He will come in about it by-and-by."

Mrs. Kage began unscrewing the stopper of her smelling-salts, an obstinate stopper, given to sticking, and made no remark.

"He joined me as I was leaving, and walked with me through the park," continued Caroline, breaking the pause.

Mrs. Kage had heard this so often that she was getting a little irritated. For the life of her she could not tell whether Mr. Canterbury meant anything by these attentions or whether he did not. "All shilly-shallying, Caroline. Mr. Canterbury ought to speak to you."

"He has spoken. As we stood at the stile that divides the park from the field, one word led to another, I suppose, and he asked me to be Mrs. Canterbury." The young lady spoke with listless apathy; but not with apathy was the intelligence received. The Honourable Mrs. Kage could be roused sometimes, though it took a good deal to do it.

"You lucky girl! To be provided for in this splendid manner at eighteen. How delightful!"

"Does it bode good-luck or ill-luck to receive two offers of marriage in one morning?" dreamily wondered Caroline.

"Ill-luck!" screamed Mrs. Kage. "Ill-luck to be made mistress of a splendid place like the Rock!—of unlimited wealth!—of jewels and diamonds! You happy child! You will be the envy of the world."

"Well, I don't know, mamma," said Caroline; and her tone certainly did not tell of happiness. "I had not used to care so much for those things until you talked me into it. Of course a fine establishment is desirable, and money and jewels are desirable; but—I can't tell."

"Desirable!" broke in Mrs. Kage; "money is the only desirable thing in life; I know it to my cost. I was a simpleton, and married for love: married one who had nothing but his face and his figure and his scarlet regimentals; I, a peer's daughter. He was a perfect Adonis, to be sure—and you, dear, are the very image of him, as I continually tell you—but one can't live upon beauty. And what were the wretched, miserable, lasting consequences? Why, that I sank to the level of an obscure officer's wife—and widow—and was obliged to eke out my paltry income as I best could, and am neglected and forgotten by those of my own rank. I have told your papa many a time that he had better have buried me alive than run away with me: and so he had."

"Still, money is not everything, mamma; no, nor jewels either; and I do not know whether they will compensate for

the drawbacks of an old husband who has old children. I wish I did know."

"Yes, they will, Caroline," said Mrs. Kage, leaning on her elbow, and sniffing at her vinaigrette. "*Believe me.* It is woman's destiny, unhappily, to grow up, and be married; and of course she can't go from it. And if she could, she wouldn't. Girls have exalted notions, you see, as to a married life; implanted in them at their birth, I think, by some spirit of contrariness, for I'm sure I don't know how else they come. To their notion, it seems a sort of celestial Paradise, and all they think of is, how to get into it; never reflecting that, once in, there's no getting out——"

"There it is, mamma."

"Let me finish. I say, child, it is woman's destiny to be married, just as it is a stray sheep's to be put into the pound; but I do assure you that it is not of the very slightest consequence what the husband may be: youth or age, beauty or deformity, stocked with intellect or devoid of brains; it is all one, provided he has a deep purse. This is the one only thing to look at. Suppose I had had a heap of children," logically proceeded Mrs. Kage, "where should I have been! Why, in the workhouse; worse off than any poor stray lamb in the pound."

Caroline leaned from the window, and plucked a piece of clematis. Her mother resumed—

"I repeat, that a marriage for love is the most miserable fate on earth, where a good income does not accompany it. I married for love myself, and I ought to know. Your dear papa said I worried him into his grave with my complaints; but one may just as well be in the grave as out of it, where money is wanting. As to love, it is the most wearisome Darby-and-Joan kind of thing you can imagine, enough to give one the shivers."

"He wears a wig," grumbled Caroline, reverting to her own grievances, as they ran one after another through her mind.

"The most enchanting wig I ever saw, dear: no living soul could tell that it's not natural hair. It is so beautifully blended with his own that a French coiffeur, with all his artistic skill, could not tell where the hair ends and the wig begins."

"But it *is* a wig," argued Caroline.

"Whether it's a wig, or whether it is not, it will not add to, or take from, domestic felicity."

Caroline Kage raised her eyebrows. "Domestic felicity, and old Father Canterbury!" irreverently thought she. Involuntarily, another form rose to her mind, in connection with that word; one she had just watched out of sight.

"Does he take it off at night?"

"Take off what?" asked Mrs. Kage, in momentary forgetfulness of their subject.

"The wig," irritably explained Caroline. "If he does, and I see his bald head, I shall scream frightfully."

"My dear child, let your thoughts centre upon the enormous wealth that will be yours, not upon a perishable wig," said Mrs. Kage, refreshing her face again.

"I wish I knew; I wish I knew," murmured Caroline in low tones; but her mother caught the words.

"Knew what?"

"Whether it will be for good or for ill."

Could it be that her guardian angel was, even then, warning her from this marriage? A very powerful instinct against it had arisen in her heart. Caroline hid her eyes in her hands, and strove to see what she had best do—it was not yet too late. Had she been in the habit of seeking for a Guidance that cannot fail, she would have sought it then; but she never had been. The Honourable Mrs. Kage had taught her how to enter a ballroom gracefully, had shown her how to win, by deception if need were, the favour of desirable men; but that other kind of tuition had been utterly passed over. Poor Caroline!

Mrs. Kage looked at her with a kind of hungry keenness, scarcely assured yet; and sprinkled half-a-dozen essences abroad at once. "Was he all rapture, dear?"

"Who?" cried Caroline, starting from her reverie, and a burning blush suffused itself over her face.

"Mr. Canterbury."

"Oh!" was the slighting comment, for the question had certainly borne another reference to her mind. "Why should Mr. Canterbury be in a rapture?"

"When you accepted him, dearest."

"I did not accept him."

Mrs. Kage half raised herself, looked at Caroline, and then fell back in a flood of tears, bemoaning her hard fate, and her daughter's folly in having rejected the Rock. She had already been anticipating a large share of its magnificent comforts. "A mansion fit for a king; carriages at command; servants in numbers; luxurious pineries, and hothouses, and conservatories; wines from every part of the known world; delicacies served on silver and gold; and a banker's book that has no end! Oh, Caroline!" Caroline pushed her hair back in a heat, and looked rather defiant. This upset Mrs. Kage. "She's a regular chip of the old block!" cried that lady, going into a frightful passion. "Her father was one of the fools of the world, and she takes after him. I've said so twenty times. Go after that miserable Tom Kage, you ungrateful girl! Be off to India with him! Live in barracks, or starve! What shall I care?"

"There is no necessity to put yourself out, mamma," coolly spoke Caroline.

"The purple and fine linen she might have indulged in!—the opera-boxes and Richmond fêtes!—the delights of a London season—the presentation at Court in feathers and pearls. And to give it all up for Thomas Kage, the low-born!"

"I said that I had rejected Mr. Kage."

"You said as well that you had rejected Mr. Canterbury. How dare you answer me?"

"No, I did not," calmly went on Caroline. "I said I had not accepted Mr. Canterbury. I suppose I should have done so had there been time; but Thomas Kage came up at the moment whilst I was hesitating. We were standing with our backs this way, and never saw him until he was close to us."

Away went Mrs. Kage's sobs. "Dearest, darling child, why did you not say so at first? My own love! you *will* accept him?"

Caroline knitted her brows. "I suppose so. I don't know what else to do."

"I will accept him for you to-night, my dear, and tell him how happy you are to be his wife. My poor nerves!"

"If I could only foresee a little into the future!" exclaimed Caroline, her face gloomy, her tone miserably doubtful. Mrs. Kage glanced at her stealthily, as she threw some sweet odours about.

"My sweet dove! I am sure you *did* like the notion of this grand good fortune. I could not have been mistaken."

"Yes, in one sense," answered Caroline, inwardly conscious that she had done her share towards leading Mr. Canterbury on. "But a strange foreboding that it will not bring me happiness is upon me, now that the moment for decision has come."

"I am delighted to hear it, dear," and Mrs. Kage had reassumed all her affected languor. "De-lighted. Things all go by contrary. When I had given your poor papa the promise to have him, in spite of every one—and an idiot he was for asking it, knowing what his paltry income was—I was all in a glow of rapturous anticipation. *My* marriage resulted in disappointment; *yours* will bring you everything that's good. I foresee it, dear."

"If I do have Mr. Canterbury, I should like to be master and mistress."

"Oh, to be sure, sweetest. He is excessively good-natured, and your wishes will be his. I should have liked to see your dead papa attempting to contradict mine!"

"I don't allude to *him*. Of course I shall do all I like, as far as he goes. I spoke of the Miss Canterburys. Suppose Olive should try to domineer over me? I would not stand it."

The notion of Olive Canterbury's attempting to domineer over her father's wife so tickled Mrs. Kage, that she laughed until she upset her choicest essence-bottle. "To think of the inexperienced goose you are, dear Caroline! You will be simply a queen, and exercise a queen's will. As to Mr. Canterbury's daughters, *I* will take care, once you are installed at the Rock, that another home is found for them."

"Mamma!" exclaimed Caroline, startled at the half-promise.

"Yes, yes, dear, it will be all right; rely upon me. My respected father, Lord Gunse, always said what a talent I had for diplomacy." And the Lord Gunse's honourable daughter fell back in easy complacency on her sofa, and gathered up the fallen essence-bottle.

Scarcely knowing, certainly not heeding, which way he took, Thomas Kage, leaving the house and his hopes behind him, had turned into the narrow privet-walk. The sun shone still on the world, but for him it seemed to have set for ever. Only those who have passed through the ordeal, can tell what that awful moment of awaking was to him. The heart had had its best life crushed out of it; it had been withered with the cruel blow. Winding round between the close hedges, when he was half-way through the confined walk he came face to face with Millicent Canterbury. So buried was he in the moment's anguish, that at first he positively did not recognize her. Millicent stopped, half-scared; scared at what she saw on his countenance. A few hurried words ensued; an apology for not being able to call at the Rock; an intimation that he was hastening away to catch a London train; and Mr. Kage, lifting his hat, passed on, leaving Millicent gazing after him, a wondering surprise on her face, a sense of blank disappointment in her heart.

"What can be amiss?" she said aloud. "He looks like a man stricken for death."

CHAPTER X.

COMING HOME.

In his fine library, its walls lined with valuable books, and its appointments fit for a royal potentate, paced George Canterbury. The light, lingering still in the western sky after the sun went down, cast its soft brightness on the room through the beautiful painted window at the farther end, imparting a red glow to the still handsome face of the room's master, so that he looked heated. Perhaps he was: the day had been sultry; Mr. Canterbury had just dined, and the flush might have been more than surface-heat. Besides, there were other causes; and if the blood coursed on faster than ordinary, it was only natural that it should do so. George Canterbury, turned sixty, had made an offer of marriage that day to a young girl of eighteen.

He called in at her mother's late in the afternoon to know his fate, and was accepted. So far, it was all very smooth and pleasant; but he had to make the communication to his daughters, and that was less so. It ought to be done at once, and he was thinking of the words he should use, and exactly what he could say, as he paced there—something after the manner of a schoolboy who cons his lesson. The shadows in the room grew deeper, and a servant came in to light the wax-candles; but he found himself stopped. A semi-darkened atmosphere is less embarrassing to make a disagreeable communication in than a glare of light; and the master of the Rock was conscious of it.

"Don't light up yet, John. Go and say to Miss Canterbury that I wish to see her here."

Olive came in. A shivering dread lay within her of what she was going to hear; but nothing of it appeared in her manner; she was calm, grand, stately as usual. "Do you want me, papa?"

"Yes. Sit down, Olive."

Every word that George Canterbury had been rehearsing went clean out of his head. He had never been troubled with nervousness in any shape or form; but it was *not* pleasant to have to tell this good and grand daughter, who was herself turned thirty, and had been for many years the Rock's entire mistress, that he was about to bring home a young wife. Olive sat down, implicitly obedient, and waited. He imparted the news somehow, in rather a lame fashion; and he had less trouble than he expected in being understood. Had he made the communication four-and-twenty hours earlier, Oliver Canterbury's utter surprise and shock would have discomposed him; but she had now been warned of it. Never a word did she utter while he spoke. To any one but her father she would have remonstrated against so unsuitable a scheme, and not spared it condemnation; but to *him*, remembering the duty of a daughter, she remained silent. She could not praise; she would not blame. It was a bitter moment in Olive Canterbury's life.

"Do you fancy, sir, that this can possibly bring satisfaction to yourself?" she asked in low tones, breaking the painful silence.

"Certainly I do, Olive; there can be no doubt it will."

"I—I suppose you wish me to understand that the measure is irrevocable, not merely one that you contemplate as probable?"

"Of course it is," answered Mr. Canterbury, in the rather fractious tone that opposition sometimes induces; for of all men living, none bore opposition less well than George Canterbury. His temperament was the most yielding in the world, and to be crossed troubled him. "Should I have sent for you to tell you this, Olive, had it not been irrevocable? We shall be married directly."

There was nothing further to be said then. Olive tried to falter out some words of congratulation, of hope for his future happiness; but they froze on her tongue, and her dry lips refused to speak them. She was glad to escape from the room; Mr. Canterbury was not less glad that she should do so.

"Well, what were you wanted for?" was the salutation that greeted Miss Canterbury, when she returned to her sisters in the lighted drawing-room; and it was Mrs. Dunn who spoke it. "What news have you heard?"

"The worst news possible to be heard; the news you prepared us for to-day, Lydia," was Olive's reply, as she sank into a seat, stunned and miserable. "Caroline Kage is to take my dead mother's place."

"I told you so," was Lydia Dunn's answer. And there was actually a sort of complaisant satisfaction in her tone—not at the doubtful blow proving true, but at her own clear-sightedness in finding it out.

Jane Canterbury turned her head from the light with a faint moan; Millicent dropped her face upon the table amidst her sewing-silks, and burst into tears; Mrs. Dunn, on the contrary, advanced full into the rays of the chandelier, and stood upright, angry, indignant.

"Do not meet it in this spirit, girls; show your dignity, if you possess any. I presume you held out for your rights, Miss Canterbury?"

"What rights?" returned Olive, too utterly prostrate to retain her usual self-possession and good sense.

"What rights?" repeated Mrs. Dunn, tauntingly, for she

had no notion of people's yielding to ill-fortune. "Well, that *is* a pertinent question." But Olive could not retort; Mrs. Dunn saw it, and made the best of it. "Has it not occurred to you, Olive, that you ought to have an explicit understanding with your father?—that your privileges and your sisters' liberties and comforts, as daughters of this house, must remain intact, secure from the capricious control of any interloper. Did you say this?"

"Lydia, I could not say it!"

"I see I must act for you all," said Mrs. Dunn, with condescending patronage. "I *did* think you were strong-minded, Olive."

"So did I," said poor Olive, "until this came."

Perhaps Mrs. Dunn—a hard woman by nature—could not understand or realize to herself what a blow this, their father's marriage, was to the unwedded daughters of the house. She had quitted home and home ties; she had her dwelling and her interests away; her father and the Rock no longer, so to say, belonged to her; but she was quite ready, in her domineering spirit, to make their cause hers. She thought it was her mission to put the world, including Mr. Canterbury, to rights when it wanted it; and she liked amazingly the anticipated battle. The library was lighted when she entered, and George Canterbury sat in his evening spectacles (which had double glasses), calmly reading the county paper. To see his self-asserting daughter Lydia come in, opening the door with an air of authority, acted on him as a sort of shock. He had hoped the unpleasantness of the matter was over; and he had always been rather afraid of Lydia.

"Sir, this is a startling communication you have made to Olive," she began, not choosing to hint at any previous suspicions of her own. "Can it possibly be true?"

Mr. Canterbury fidgeted the least in the world, so far as slightly to ruffle the leaves of the journal, and intimated that it was true. Lydia had taken up her station in front of him, at a few paces' distance.

"What is to become of my sisters?"

"Become of them!" repeated Mr. Canterbury, holding the paper before his face, as if still perusing it. "In what way?"

"I put myself out of the discussion altogether, having my own home—which I shall very soon return to now," continued Mrs. Dunn, decisively. "But they have no other home to retire to, sir."

"They do not require any other."

"As soon as you marry, it will be your wife's home, not theirs."

"Absurd!" repeated Mr. Canterbury. "If I chose to bring home four-and-twenty wives, there would be room for your sisters then."

"In point of space there might be. But young wives are given to be domineering, and Miss Kage may take a fancy for indulging in it. How, in that case, could they remain at the Rock? There's no saying, indeed, what extent of putting upon Jane might bear; but Olive——"

"This is uncalled for, Lydia," interrupted Mr. Canterbury, rising in surprise, and facing his daughter. "Miss Kage is of an amiable nature; she and they are on intimate and affectionate terms, as you know. Those terms will only be cemented by a closer union."

Never had Lydia Dunn a greater mind for anything in her life than to tell her father he was a fool for thinking so. Looking at him, she wondered whether any remonstrance or reasoning, possible to be urged, could arrest this most unsuitable and wild project; and she decided that it would not. It had not been Lydia, however, if she had kept quite silent.

"I beg your pardon, papa—I cannot help speaking. Caroline Kage is so young, that she might be your grand-daughter. If you marry her, you will be the laughing-stock of the whole county."

George Canterbury felt grievously offended.

"It is not your place to say these things to me, Lydia. As to Caroline's age, that is a matter solely for her consideration and mine."

"You had a great deal better marry Mrs. Kage."

"Thank you," he spoke stiffly. "I think you have said nearly enough, Lydia."

Convinced that whatever she said would do no good towards arresting the marriage, Lydia thought perhaps she had. She

returned to the subject of her sisters. "Will you promise—will you undertake that my sisters' home shall not be rendered unhappy?—that they shall be as free and independent in it as they have been?"

"Certainly I will," responded Mr. Canterbury. "You must have taken up very strange ideas to fear otherwise."

"No, sir, the ideas are quite natural. There will probably be two antagonistic powers in the house, once Caroline Kage enters it. Olive has been its mistress hitherto; and her own."

"She can be mistress of herself and all else as much as she has been," hastily spoke Mr. Canterbury. "Except, of course, in the matter of—of housekeeping, and all that," he added, his thoughts falling on domestic matters. "Olive must resign her control over the household."

"Olive will not expect to retain it, sir, when you put a wife at its head. I speak of my sisters' personal interests. Will they be allowed the perfect freedom of action, the comfort, the uncontrolled liberty of themselves and their time, that they have hitherto possessed?"

"Yes, certainly they will. What should hinder it?"

Mr. Canterbury stared in a little surprise as he put the question. He was by no means a clear-sighted man: the old saying, of not seeing an inch beyond the nose, would have aptly applied to him. He fully believed his daughters would be just as free and happy when Caroline came home as they were now; and he deemed Lydia most unreasonable in suggesting otherwise; thought, indeed, that she must be doing it for the sake of cavilling.

"I will say no more, papa, except to remind you that things in similar cases have been known to turn out quite differently from pleasant expectations. I foresee that they may in this; and I hope, should it be so, you will remember your promise to take care of the comfort and happiness of Olive and her sisters."

"The girl must be a little off her head to-night," said George Canterbury to himself, as Lydia went out and left him alone.

"No hope, no redress!" she exclaimed, when she returned to her sisters; and she flung up her hands in temper as she

spoke. "He is going to make an idiot of himself, and won't be prevented; and Caroline Kage will soon be mistress of the Rock."

The year had grown later; the brown tints of autumn were spreading in the foliage, imparting that wondrous beauty to Nature's landscape that the other seasons possess not. Not in their own pleasant morning-room, but in the magnificent drawing-room, were gathered the unmarried daughters of George Canterbury. They sat, as may be said, in state, awaiting the return of the bride and bridegroom after their honeymoon. In state, so far as the room went, but they were at their ordinary occupations. Miss Canterbury and Jane wore violet silks; Leta had on a charming pink of some fancy material.

After a few days given to their natural repugnance and grief when the communication was first made to them, to the bitter heartache, than which nothing could be keener, the Miss Canterburys resigned themselves to what they could not prevent, and made the best of matters with outward cheerfulness and grace. Not so Mrs. Dunn. She prided herself upon being independent, upon "showing what she thought," and went back to London. Simpering Mrs. Kage, with her own peculiar taste, expressed her wonder to Lydia that she did not remain to "assist" at her father's wedding. Mrs. Dunn bluntly answered that, of the two, she thought she would rather assist at his funeral. The marriage took place in August; so, you see, no time was lost. Mrs. Kage never was free from an inward fear that Caroline might yet retract her consent, and hurried it on at least in an equal degree with the fond bridegroom elect. She got up a charming little fable that Thomas Kage had fallen in love with some London lady of fortune, to whom he was about to be united, and repeated it, with a great many confirmatory details, for the edification of Caroline. But Mrs. Kage need not have feared; Caroline had no thought of retracting. Like a child dazzled by the glitter of a coveted toy, she was eager for it.

Mrs. Kage showed her sense and craft in one respect—she caused the wedding to be almost a private one. When something was said about who should give the bride away, Mr.

Canterbury suggested, as was natural, her only living relative on the father's side—Thomas Kage. Mrs. Kage did not accept the suggestion; she wrote a pretty note to Mr. Carlton of Chilling Hall, and he undertook the office. The day of the wedding was kept private, the hour fixed for it was the early one of nine in the morning, and there were no spectators. The Miss Canterburys countenanced it by their presence; Millicent was bridesmaid; Mr. Rufort, the new Rector, performed the ceremony. There was a simple breakfast at Mrs. Kage's, to which all sat down except the two elder Miss Canterburys, who drove straight home from church; and then the happy pair, as announced by the local newspapers in newspaper phraseology, started on their tour for the Lakes, to enjoy the honeymoon.

It was October now. The honeymoon was over, and a long honeymoon it had been; and it was to be hoped they *had* enjoyed it. The "happy pair" were expected home to-day after their six weeks' absence. Everything was in readiness to receive them. The Miss Canterburys, knowing that all was complete and in order, sat in the state drawing-room, quietly pursuing their ordinary occupations. Like right-minded ladies as they were, they were prepared to render due honour and deference to their father's wife. But, as Judith, one of the housemaids at the Rock, remarked to a helpmate, it was "hard lines" for them. No doubt of that; a great deal of heart-schooling discipline was still requisite.

"Leta, how you keep getting up! Your drawing will not be the better for it."

"I can't help it, Olive. Things seem to be so strange that it makes me restless. Suppose I should forget myself, and call her Carry!"

"What are we to call her?" suddenly wondered Jane. "It never occurred to me."

"Mrs. Canterbury, when speaking of her," said Olive.

"But when speaking to her?"

"I don't know. Nothing. It would be rather ridiculous to say 'mamma'"—and Olive's fine face took a momentary tinge of mockery—"and equally out of place to call her 'Caroline.' There is only 'Mrs. Canterbury' to fall back upon."

"Did you recollect to order mamma's portrait to be taken out of their rooms, Olive?" asked Leta.

"My dear, I have recollected everything. It is removed to mine; and Edgar's is also. Mrs. Canterbury will find all things as they should be. Listen! I really believe Neel is bringing in a visitor!"

Olive was right. The butler, speaking with some one as he advanced, threw open the door, and announced: "Mrs. Kage."

"What an oppressive day for October!" languidly spoke Mrs. Kage, as she sank on the nearest sofa. "My dears, how are you? Do place me a screen, Millicent; your fire is like a volcano." She took off her bonnet and cloak; and, pushing back her shawl of black lace, left her dress displayed. By which dress they saw she had come intending to remain for dinner. "A lovely day, though, although it is close: quite a good omen for the return of the travellers. My dears, I heard from your mamma this morning."

Olive bit her lip, partly in amusement. Your mamma! And Caroline more than ten years younger than herself.

"We have heard also, Mrs. Kage. My father wrote. They will be at home this evening to dinner."

"Yes, that is what I came up about, for one thing; all the morning I had a nervous headache, or I should have been here earlier. I must see to the arrangements."

"What arrangements?" inquired Olive, in surprise.

"My daughter's rooms, and so forth."

"The arrangements are made: the rooms are in readiness," returned Olive.

"My dearest Miss Canterbury, you have no doubt done to the best of your ability, but a mother's eye can alone tell what will please her daughter."

Olive drew herself up. "I trust the arrangements will please Mrs. Canterbury. I should like her to see that we have cared for her comfort. Should she wish any alteration made in the rooms, she can give her own orders when she sees them."

"Thank you, my dear; I will presently go through them, if you please, with one of the housemaids," rejoined Mrs. Kage, whose tone, drawling as it was, bespoke quiet resolution. "And now about dinner? what have you ordered?" Miss Canterbury

was silent, from sheer amazement. "Can I see the housekeeper?"

"Mrs. Kage!" uttered the astounded Olive, "I do not understand this. The dinner was fixed upon some hours ago. It will prove satisfactory to Mrs. Canterbury, I have no doubt.

"I know what my dear pet likes; and she has begged me, in her letter, to take care that things are comfortable for her."

"As I trust they will be found," said the indignant Olive, whilst Jane stole out of the room, and Millicent bent over her cardboard with a heightened colour. "Should there be any particular dish you wish added to the dinner, I will ascertain whether it can be done."

"I will see the housekeeper myself, dear," persisted Mrs. Kage, in the most gently-polite tone imaginable, "and direct the alterations I may think necessary."

A flash of Olive's imperious temper broke out. She rose from her seat, not, however, lifting her voice to anger, though it was unmistakably firm. "I have been mistress of the house for many years, Mrs. Kage, and I believe I have been found capable of conducting it. So long as I remain so—which will only be until the coming home of Mrs. Canterbury—I am in no need of assistance, and cannot permit interference. The dinner must be served this evening as I have ordered it."

"But you are shockingly rude, my dear, in saying this to my face: quite ill-bred."

"I think not. I do not wish to be."

"I am Mrs. Canterbury's mother."

"I do not forget it. As soon as Mrs. Canterbury enters the house, I give up all authority to her; until she does, I cannot yield the smallest portion of it, even to you. Forgive me for saying I am exceedingly surprised that you should wish it."

"Well, my dear Miss Canterbury, in showing this obstinacy in regard to your new mother, I can only think you stand in the light of your own interests. However, let it pass; as you say, you have but an hour of further power; it does not much matter for that short time."

Olive clenched her hand on the beautiful table-cover, keeping down her passion; Millicent's brow burnt as she turned it—

and could not help the look it bore—on Mrs. Kage. That lady glided from the sofa.

"And now, dears, you will ring for the upper-housemaid. I will visit the rooms and see what changes may be expedient."

"No!" spoke Olive, her temper flashing out at last. "The rooms shall remain as they are, Mrs. Kage, until your daughter enters into possession of them."

Olive meant what she said, and Mrs. Kage saw it. All in a minute a doubt crossed that honourable lady as to whether her policy had been a safe one. So intensely afraid had she been, ever since the marriage, that perhaps her own influence at the Rock might not be what she fully purposed it should be, or that her daughter might find her sway curbed by the imperious and powerfully-willed Miss Canterbury, that she had come to the resolution of taking the bull by the horns and bringing her authority to bear before its time. A sentence in Mrs. Canterbury's letter, hoping things would be made comfortable for her, and that her mamma must see they were—though it is more than probable the writer had not exactly meant in the way of beds and tables, and dishes for dinner—had afforded Mrs. Kage the plea for coming up as she did. But had she been quite wise in doing so? In the doubt that crossed her, she deemed it well to veer suddenly round to sweetness, and so disarm hostilities.

"Pray forgive me, my darling Miss Canterbury. It is quite an anomalous position that my poor child will be placed in, and I was so anxious to spare you trouble. If you do not feel the different arrangements as a worry, why, of course, I should not wish to interfere. Caroline has a charming temper, I assure you, and I feel certain you will all be very happy together."

"I desire nothing better than that we should, Mrs. Kage," coldly spoke Miss Canterbury.

Mrs. Kage, sweetly amiable, sank back on the sofa, after requesting that one of the lady's-maids might be summoned to carry away her things. Placing her fan and her various bottles on a small stand beside her, for she never went out without them, she flung some scent about and grew confidential.

"Of course, my dears, you are women of the world. At least, *you* are, my good Miss Canterbury; necessarily so from

your age and position. Therefore I may speak without hesitation all the thoughts of my heart. To marry a man of Mr. Canterbury's years was a great sacrifice for a beautiful girl of eighteen. It is of no good mincing the fact; some things are as palpable as that much-talked-of problem in Euclid about the ass and the bridge, which my father, Lord Gunse, was given to quote. But I am quite sure Caroline did not look upon the marriage in that light; she did not see it as a sacrifice, for she was in love with your father."

Olive made no reply. She began counting the stitches in her netting.

"Adored him, I may say," resumed Mrs. Kage, improving upon her tissue of falsehoods. "A-dored him. I saw it from almost the first. Of course I naturally thought she would be averse to such an offer—might probably not listen to it. 'Now, my darling,' I said to her one day, 'there cannot be the smallest doubt what good Mr. Canterbury's intentions are; but let me implore of you, *don't* allow any thoughts of his wealth to influence you; *dis*-courage him if you do not like him.' 'Dearest mother,' the innocent lamb responded, 'it's not his wealth that will influence me, but himself; I *love* Mr. Canterbury.' And so, when I hear the impertinent world saying that my daughter's was nothing but a marriage of interest—and that delightful old maid, Mr. Carlton's sister, said it to my face only yesterday—the remembrance of that outspoken avowal of Caroline's acts on my mind like a balm."

"I think your daughter could not have been quite indifferent to my father's wealth," said Olive, wishing the balm extended also to Mrs. Kage's tongue. But she did not wait to prolong the conversation; she left the room on the plea of seeing after Jane, leaving Leta as hostess.

"Ah, my dear, your sister would not say it if she knew all," said Mrs. Kage to Leta. "Caroline had the most magnificent prospect offered to her of going out to be a nabob's wife in India. And *he* was a young man."

"Indeed!"

"She received both the offers in one day. Your father's first, the other's next. He came miles and miles and miles to make it. 'Give up Mr. Canterbury for *him!*' she said

indignantly. 'No, not though he could offer me all the rupees contained in Bengal.' 'Quite right, my sweet love,' I replied to her; 'never let vile gold sway your best affections.' And I say she was right."

Leta had lifted her head; her colour was going and coming. Was it *possible* that this could be true? Too well she knew who it was that had come "miles and miles and miles" that past day. Unconsciously she let his name escape her—Thomas Kage.

"Well, yes, it was Thomas Kage, my dear Miss Leta," confessed the wily lady, a little taken back at Leta's discernment. "I don't mind telling you; but you must not talk of it again. He began to love Caroline when we were at Little Bay; *I* was afraid of it; but—ah—some one contrived to throw me off the scent then. As the months went on, *he* went on, loving her all the more passionately; and as soon as he thought he could marry, through this Indian appointment being offered him, he came down to ask her to go out. Of course she said 'No,' Mr. Canterbury being in the way, for whom she had learnt to care, you see, Leta; and Tom Kage went away with a broken heart. *I* saw that."

A distant sound of carriage-wheels was an excuse for Millicent's running to the window. Her face had turned white and cold as snow in winter. Things that had appeared strange to her before were becoming suddenly clear. It was Caroline Kage he had loved; it was Caroline his visits had been intended for, not her; and Caroline—oh, it flashed upon her all too surely—had only been fooling her in prating of his love. She—Caroline herself—had loved him; and Millicent felt half sick at the thoughts instinct revealed to her. Too well she comprehended now the look as of death on Thomas Kage's face, when they met in the privet-walk. He had then been given up for the wealthy master of the Rock. Just as the bitterness of the awaking had been his then, so was it now Millicent Canterbury's.

The sound of wheels drew nearer; the carriage came in view, its four horses prancing gaily up the park. It contained the gay bride and bridegroom; and Leta in the stir escaped to her chamber. Caroline was looking charming—charming

as a summer rose, as Mr. Canterbury handed her out of the carriage, and came in with her on his proud arm. Whatever the young wife had found the honeymoon, dull or spiritless, tame or more than a little wearying, *he* had thought it rapture. She was gay enough now in meeting them; she kissed her mother, she kissed Olive, she kissed Jane; she asked Neel how his wrist was (for the man had had a rather serious accident to it just before the wedding); she nodded to John; she won, in fact, all hearts.

"But where's Leta?"

Ah, where was Leta? Miss Canterbury thought Leta had been in the drawing-room to the last moment; Mrs. Kage confirmed it, saying Leta had been the one to announce their arrival to her. Of course it was supposed that Leta would turn-up from somewhere; and the pleased young wife went to her rooms. She did not see Leta until just before dinner. Mrs. Canterbury was turning out of her boudoir rather swiftly, in the prettiest white-silk dress that young bride ever wore, with an amethyst necklace on her delicate neck, and caught Leta gliding swiftly by. She drew her in.

"Where have you been, Millicent, that you did not come to welcome me?"

But ere the question could be answered, Mrs. Canterbury obtained a better view of the face partially turned from her. A white cold face, more like a face of terror than aught else; certainly one that had a great deal of despair in it.

"Millicent, what is the matter?"

Never did there exist a more straightforward, open-natured girl than Millicent Canterbury. One single moment of inward battle with those feelings that seemed as if they had been outraged, insulted, deceived; and then she answered, looking full at the surprised questioner.

"Mrs. Canterbury, I have been thinking in my room whether to speak to you, or—or to bury it all for ever," said poor Millicent in still tones, with pauses occasioned by her laboured breathing. "This moment alone with you has decided it. You did me a great wrong. Why, when we were at Little Bay, and after it—for months after it—why did you feed me with the fable that he was in love with me?—he, Thomas Kage?"

A burning rush of colour, fading away into a ghastly whiteness: a trembling, terrified, glittering stare in the beautiful violet-blue eyes; but Mrs. Canterbury gave no other answer. "It was *you* he loved," continued Millicent. "He thought no more of me than of the idle wind that passes. You knew it all. Why did you deceive me? Only this day—an hour ago—have my eyes been opened. What had I done that you should have played upon me so cruel a joke?"

"I don't know what it is you are talking of," said Mrs. Canterbury, recovering her self-possession. "I remember nothing about Thomas Kage, or you, or Little Bay. For goodness' sake don't attack me unnecessarily, Leta."

But the tone had a hard, shrill, hysterical ring in it, proving how powerfully the accusation had told upon her. And she went back into her chamber and shut the door abruptly, leaving Millicent standing there in her bitter pain.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE EVENING PAPER.

Thomas Kage sat in his chambers in the Temple. It was a bright afternoon in August (for the exigencies of the story require us to go back for some weeks), passing rapidly on to evening. All the world had gone out of London except Mr. Kage: he could not well afford a holiday, and said to himself that he did not want one. Seated at his table in the inner room, whose window overlooked the Temple Gardens and the river winding past it, he was busy perusing some papers. The business that had taken him to Aberton early in the spring, and to which an interruption occurred, was again going on. It was not entirely connected with his profession as a barrister, but was a matter he had privately taken in hand to help a friend. The law-courts were up, Thomas Kage had little to do, and so was at liberty to give his time to this. He sat with his head leaning on his hand, thinking that very shortly he would have to go to Aberton again, unless his friend, Mr.

Rashburn, came up to London. He did not care to go to Aberton; but if he had to go, should he, or should he not, walk over to Chilling, and see her who had played that havoc with his heart?

The traces of the conflict he had gone through since that fatal June day, only two months past, but to him seeming like an age, might be seen in his countenance. The cheeks were even thinner than before, the eyes wore a feverish light, the voice had an habitually-subdued tone of sadness in it; signs that an accurate observer may sometimes note in one who has gone through an ordeal of silent mental suffering. Perhaps it was not well—well for his resolve of forgetting her—that ever and anon some foolish thought or proverb, such as, "While there's life there's hope," should dart into his mind, leaving a faint ray of what looked very like hope behind it. Whilst she remained Caroline Kage, and unappropriated; while there existed a chance—and the world is full of such chances—that he should work on to riches, it seemed not absolutely impossible that brightness might succeed to darkness. Passionately though he had loved her, perfect as he thought her, he had not failed to see that she had used him cruelly; and he had come up to town that June day calling her heartless. He rejected the offer of going to India; he set himself a task—to forget her.

But as the weeks went on, and the pain, ever racking his breast, became a trifle less keen, or perhaps it was only that he grew more inured to it, she resumed some of her old ascendency over him, and he began to find excuses for her. *She* had not rejected him; at least, not of her own free will; her mother must have forced her to it. And so, if he had to go to Aberton, it might be a question whether he should not go on to Chilling. He was beginning to yearn for another sight of her as few men have yearned for anything in this life. One fact he was very certain of: he knew he could not be mistaken in that—she had loved him passionately, with all her heart. It might be—well, yes, it might—that she was suffering as he suffered; and that to see him once more would bring happiness to her as it would to him. He looked up at the bright ray of sun slanting past the window, but not touching it; and some-

what of the same brightness illumined his spirit. The London clocks chimed out an evening hour, and Thomas Kage was working on. The boy came in: one he shared with two more barristers, both of whom had gone on the wing; so Mr. Kage could have him wholly.

"It's the paper come, sir," he said, putting the evening journal on the table.

Mr. Kage nodded. "You need not wait, James."

No need for a second dismissal. The boy said good evening to his master, and flew off. Mr. Kage, coming to the end of the parchment he had been looking over, thought he had done enough for the day, and put the dry law documents by until the morrow. Taking up the newspaper, he walked to the window, holding it in his hand while he looked out on the busy clamour and noise.

The gardens were crowded. With the rising of the law-courts a week ago, and the migration of the barristers, leaving the Temple to emptiness and Thomas Carr Kage, the gardens had been opened for a couple of hours towards sunset to the poor little riff-raff children of London. From the close courts, within a stone's throw, they came; from the miserable haunts, lying near to St. Clement Danes' fine church; from the Seven Dials and St. Giles's; from the unwholesome buildings on the Surrey side, and near the river: on, on they trooped, these ill-fated children, making for the pleasant place in sure and swift bands, something like that great army of locusts, that are not to be turned aside by man, so powerfully described in the prophecies of Joel. They had not long been let in; a crowd of them: boys and girls, and wee things and babies: scarcely a whole garment or sound shoe amongst them—only rags and tatters and dirt; and with it all merry shouts and light laughter, just as though they had been the favoured of the land, and slept in cots of down with silken curtains of purple. How they enjoyed that freedom on the greensward; leaping, tumbling, rolling! How careful they were not to injure Mr. Broome's growing chrysanthemums—for they had been warned of the danger *that* might cause to this generously-accorded privilege. But Mr. Kage thought they might have been contented with making half the noise, and felt inclined to stop his ears.

A crowded steamer—City men going homewards—passed up the Thames; one with not a dozen people on it steamed downwards. Some of the noisy infantile crew below rushed to the garden edge and shouted cheers after both of them. In clattered the boy James again; and his master, who had just opened the paper, turned round. Mr. James, having lingered on the stairs and landing-places with an acquaintance or two, had been waylaid by the postman. Two letters for T. C. Carr Kage, Esq. On the whole, young Mr. James had reason to like the master he chiefly served, and did not very much grudge going back into the rooms to deliver the letters. But Mr. Kage's eye had been caught by something in the evening journal. He motioned to the table, and the boy left the letters on it. It was a flaming paragraph, written in the true style of the newspaper contributor, who seems to like to expend his energies equally in recording fashionable movements and unfashionable murders. *This* was of a "marriage in high life." George Canterbury, of the Rock, Chilling, to Caroline, only child of the late Captain Alfred Kage and of the Honourable Mrs. Kage, and grand-daughter of the late Right Honourable Augustus Lord Gunse. There was an account of the lovely bride's charming attire, and of the state in which the happy pair departed for the Lakes, there to pass the honeymoon; but Thomas Kage read it not. After the first few words of announcement, telling the tale, he sat like a man turned into stone; the journal fallen from his hands, his white face lifted.

Very strange to say, not a syllable of the contemplated union had penetrated to London and Thomas Kage. And yet perhaps not so strange, if circumstances are taken into consideration. When Lydia Dunn went back from the Rock full of it, there lay on her heart a faint hope that even then some fortunate accident might happen to prevent the unseemly wedding; and for once her tongue was still. The Miss Canterburys, in writing to Sarah Annesley, felt ashamed to speak of it; time enough, they thought, when it should actually have taken place. Other people did not know of it; and Mrs. Kage had been cautiously silent throughout.

Anyway, it came upon Thomas Kage this evening as a blow. At the first moment he believed it not. But the account was

too elaborate for anything but truth. Smoothing the newspaper, he read it again; all. So it was for Mr. Canterbury, the sexagenarian, he had been rejected! It was for the grandeur and riches of the Rock! Caroline's words—spoken in that last memorable interview—came surging back to him; of the carriages, the court-dresses, the jewels, the grandeur, the thousands and thousands a-year she must gain in marrying, or not marry at all. There could be no doubt that she had been thinking of Mr. Canterbury. The alliance must have been even then arranged. A cold moisture overspread his grey face; and he flung up his hands to cover it, shutting out the evening light.

"God forgive her for her heartlessness, and me for my credulity! God help me to bear it!"

Ay! And none knew—none in this world—how much need of help he had; how he was shrinking under this decisive blow. He could not have told afterwards how long he sat there. Had he been a woman he might have fallen to the ground in utter abandonment, and buried his face from even the very light of heaven. He only sat still as a statue; never moving, scarcely breathing, his head and eyelids alike drooping; looking just as though the blow had struck him physically as well as mentally. When he roused himself it was with a shiver. The letters waiting on the table caught his eye. The one was from Aberton, concerning the business-matter he was engaged on; from the other, as he opened it, fell two cards, tied together with silver cord—a fashion not obsolete in Chilling. No need to speculate whose names they bore; and the address was in the characterless, nearly illegible handwriting of Mrs. Kage. "Mr. Canterbury." "Mrs. Canterbury." Thomas Kage tore each card in two, and threw the pieces into his waste-paper basket.

Twilight was falling on the earth when he went out. The hum and the noise were no longer heard; the disorderly crew had dispersed, leaving their traces behind them. As Thomas Kage turned into the garden, a thought came across his mind, in the midst of its confusion, that if the power lay with him he would banish this untidy crew; but the next moment he remembered the boon it was to the poor things, and regretted

the thought. He wandered on by the path to the foot of the garden, and there sat down with his pain. The sunny daylight had turned into a grey evening; the air seemed heavy, the skies were leaden—all a type of his own bruised and weary heart. The recollection of his last interview with his mother flashed into his mind. "Pain, toil, sorrow, whatever trouble may be deemed necessary for you—you will not fail," Lady Kage had said. "You will bear up bravely, looking to the end." And his answer had been that he *would* bear: "Yes, God helping me."

A light in the leaden sky drew his attention upwards. The clouds had parted, giving glimpses of a golden flood; the young moon showed herself for a moment. It actually seemed a type to Thomas Kage that the help he had wished for was surely there; always waiting for any moment when necessity should call for it. He thought, perhaps fancifully, that his mother might be looking down upon him—as she herself had said in dying she should do, and drawn her comfort from the imaginative picture. Did she see all his heart-sick pain? Could her influence, reminding him of his undertaking to struggle manfully, reach him here? He surely believed it might. Bending his forehead in his hand, he thought and thought; making good resolves to bear up, and to strive from that moment to put from him resolutely all remembrance of the love that had formed his day-dream. Henceforth, *being helped*, he would be more energetic in all life's duties; bearing his cross in silence, looking not for reward here; and so forget that anything, but working on patiently for the better end, had ever been hoped for.

He rose up then, left the solitary garden, and bent his steps westward, disregarding cabs and omnibuses and any other modes of conveyance that might present themselves. When the mind is racked with trouble, walking is the most acceptable. His dinner might be waiting at home, but he could not take it. Old Dorothy would only have it put away, and think business detained him. In passing through Paradise Square, for he took the longest way home he could find, he saw Mrs. Dunn's carriage standing at her door. That lady, going abroad to some evening party, came swiftly out of her house at the same

moment, the lappets of her jaunty widow's cap stirring gently behind her

"Is it you, Mr. Kage? How are you?"

"Thank you," was all he answered. "Are you well?"

"As well as that disgraceful news from home will allow me to be," said Mrs. Dunn tartly, drawing him a few steps farther up on the broad white pavement, that her servants, waiting with the carriage, might not hear the complaint. "Yes, Mr. Kage, I repeat the word deliberately—disgraceful."

"You allude to——"

"To my father's marriage," she interrupted, speaking what he had hesitated to do. "You have heard of it, of course?"

"Some cards came to me this afternoon."

"Cards!" wrathfully repeated Mrs. Dunn. "That woman, the mother, has had the face to send some to me. She'd better have sent a caricature of two fools' heads instead. How long have you known of it, Mr. Kage?"

"I never had the slightest suspicion that such an event was in contemplation."

"That it was possible, you might say. No; there has been craft at work, and the thing was kept quiet. My father was a fool, the women were rogues. I cannot help speaking my mind of them, although they are your relatives."

"Were you not made acquainted with it?"

"I found it out," said Mrs. Dunn. "When I went home last June, I had not been many hours in the house before my suspicions were aroused. I saw the game Mrs. Kage and her daughter were playing; I saw that it must have been going on for some time. Every possible wile were they exercising to entrap my father."

"Surely not Caroline?" he interrupted. "It must have been solely her mother."

"Caroline was the worst of the two," answered plain-speaking Mrs. Dunn. "If her mother planned, she executed. I never saw a girl go more warily to work. I watched for some days, and made myself sure before I said a word. They little suspected I was looking on at the cards; and I saw the hands of both, and how they played them. Had Caroline Kage's heart been engaged in the contest—though even to say such a thing

seems unpardonably absurd—had she been seeking to entrap the most desirable young fellow living, she could not have put forth her fascinations with more subtle skill."

"I could not have supposed her capable of it," he murmured.

"I dare say not," and Mrs. Dunn's voice took a slightly sarcastic tone. "Some of them thought her an angel: perhaps you did."

A bright flush, visible enough had they been standing to face the gas-lamp at the corner, dyed his brow; but he did not answer.

"She is a pretty child outwardly, while inwardly she is almost as crafty as her mother; and that's saying a good deal," avowed Mrs. Dunn, continuing to pace the pavement in perfect independence of all gazers. "When I disclosed to my sisters the play I saw going on, they were petrified—once they could be got to believe it might be true. Nothing could be done, it was too late; during that very hour that I was speaking to them, my father proposed to the girl, and the wedding was fixed. I came away from the Rock, refusing the countenance to affairs that my presence there might tacitly have given. You, amidst others, no doubt wondered that my anticipated visit there turned out so short a one."

"I remember," he murmured.

"I never opened my lips to a living soul. It was possible, I thought, that some fortunate accident might intervene to prevent the wedding; and I was, besides, too grieved to speak. My sisters said nothing in their letters, and I hoped it was done away with—that my father had come to his senses, or Caroline Kage to hers. When those miserable cards arrived to-day, 'Mr. and Mrs. Canterbury,' I wished I was near enough to fling them back in Mr. and Mrs. Canterbury's faces, and tell them what I thought."

Mr. Kage remembered where he had flung his.

"I shall tell it to Mrs. Kage some time, if I don't to them. One of these days she and I may be face to face again; and *I* am at liberty to speak, you know, Mr. Kage. Having a home of my own, I feel free to do so, just as one might who is independent of the family. Yes, yes, Madam Kage; you no doubt think you have accomplished a great thing; but it may not turn out to be altogether for Miss Caroline's good."

"I should scarcely think it can," he said in a low tone, speaking the sentiments that kept beating upon his heart.

"Think!" retorted Mrs. Dunn. "No match ever made in this world was more incongruous. My father is turned sixty; she is not twenty—what can they expect?"

"Very true."

"Have you reflected on what it must be for my sisters?" whispered Mrs. Dunn, as they drew slowly towards the carriage; and for once her tone told of pain. "Olive has been mistress of the Rock for twelve years, and my father brings home a mistress to put over her head,—a girl younger in years than Millicent. Do you know what I think, Mr. Kage?"

"No."

"I will tell you, then; and, mind, some instinct whispers me that I am right. When a girl can thrust herself in this unseemly manner between a father and his children's home, she may look out for punishment instead of happiness."

The carriage drove off, leaving him standing, Mrs. Dunn bowing her silent adieu from its window. It seemed to him that there were to be nothing but encounters that night; for as he turned into Paradise Terrace, not caring where he walked, he met Miss Annesley. The servant in attendance on her went forward to Mrs. Annesley's door. "I have been spending an hour with Mrs. Garston," she explained. "Have you—have you heard the news from Chilling?"

He simply nodded in answer, his pale face turned itself a little from her.

"When Leta's letter reached me to-day, I sat thunderstruck. Oh, Mr. Kage, how unsuitable it is! Mrs. Garston has been laughing over it all the evening, and saying hard truths."

"Ay!"

"To me it seems an unholy marriage; a terrible thing."

"Does it?"

Does it? His lips could not frame a better answer; these last few minutes had been trying him to the very uttermost. Light flashed on Sarah Annesley. Had she never seen or suspected before, the strangely-wan countenance, the passively-constrained tone, might have told her the secret.

"Forgive me, oh, forgive me, Mr. Kage!" she said in a

flutter of agitation. "I—I did think you cared for her; I fancied it all that time back at Little Bay. Take comfort. If she knew it—and I am sure she did—she could not be worthy of you. All may be for the best."

Wringing his hand, she turned indoors, as if not caring to look at him after her avowal. Thomas Kage walked on down the terrace, which was a long one. His sister, Mrs. Lowther, lived at the last house in it. A servant was standing at the open door.

"How are the children to-night?" he stopped to ask.

"Very ill, sir. There's a change for the worse in Master Fairfax, and Ann has just run round for Dr. Tyndal."

Thomas Kage turned in. The sitting-rooms were empty, and he went on upstairs to the nursery. The children were ill with scarlatina; and Mr. Lowther was in Belgium, superintending the construction of a railroad. Walking about the room was the nurse, singing softly to the baby in her arms.

"Hush-sh-sh! he's all but off," cried she hastily, hearing some one enter, and supposing it to be one of her fellow-servants. "And I'm sure I don't want him woke up again, for I'm tired enough as it is."

"What is amiss, nurse?" he whispered.

The young woman turned round. "Oh, sir, I beg your pardon. Master Fairfax is very ill to-night, sir; he's quite delirious, and my mistress is afraid. Not but what I think it may be only just the turn of the disorder, when it's sure to seem at its worst."

Some one pushed open an inner door, saw who was there, and came forward. It was Mrs. Lowther. She had a nice face, in spite of its plain features; it was a little careworn, and she looked her full age, six-and-thirty. Her flaxen hair was put carelessly back; her gown, a black-and-white muslin, had plenty of creases in it; just now she was too busy helping to nurse the sick children to be particular about attire.

"I am sorry for this, Charlotte. One of them is worse, I hear."

"I think he is dying," she said in a weary, still tone. "It's Fairfax. But are you not afraid of being up here, Thomas? You may catch the fever."

"I afraid of catching a children's fever!" he lightly answered. "There's no fear. But I hope you are mistaken as to his danger. Where is he?"

Mrs. Lowther passed into the children's room. In one of the small beds lay a boy of ten. His grey eyes had a strange brightness in them; his cheeks were crimson. Throwing his head about the bed one moment, quite still the next; now he would seem to be falling into a doze, and now would wake up, rambling wildly.

"Poor little fellow!" exclaimed Thomas Kage.

Young Master Lowther was as mischievous a gentleman in ordinary as could be found within the precincts of west London. He lay disabled now. His mother stood looking on in tears.

"Do you know me, my boy?" gently asked Mr. Kage, taking the little hot hand. It was snatched away petulantly.

"You shan't do it, then, you fellows! I'm not Faxy; I tell you I'm not!" He was rambling amidst his schoolmates, with the great school grievance tormenting him. The boys had taken to call him "Faxy," which was particularly objectionable to Master Fairfax. The more he showed his dislike of it (speaking now of the past), the more they had shouted it.

Thomas Kage bent his lips, with their soothing tones, close to the troubled, restless ear.

"It is Fairfax—Fairfax. There! Fairfax."

"I am sure he's dying, Thomas," spoke Mrs. Lowther. "And Robert abroad!"

He took her hand and made her sit down, and waited a minute whilst she gave way to her tears. The boy was quiet again.

"Charlotte, you are very tired."

"Very—very. It is two nights since I was in bed."

"And, being so tired, your spirits are naturally depressed, so that things wear their worst aspect to you," he calmly resumed. "I have had some experience in illness, and do not think he is in the danger you imagine. Children seem dying one minute and are running about the next."

"He is very ill, Thomas; there cannot be a question of that. It is Robert's being away that makes me more fearful. I shall telegraph for him as soon as the doctor has been."

"What have you taken to-day?" he asked, seeing how exhausted she appeared.

"Some tea."

"Tea! Nothing better than tea?"

"With all the children ill, except baby, and Fairfax lying like this, how can I find time for regular meals? I had some toast with the tea."

"It is the very time when you ought to be careful to keep up your strength, Charlotte. If my mother were here still, she would tell you so."

Mrs. Lowther burst into a flood of tears. Overcome with fatigue, fear, anxiety, and no doubt want of sustenance, a word was sufficient to try her. "Oh, Thomas, don't make me more unhappy by recalling *her*. If she were here still, I should have something to lean on."

He went downstairs, saying nothing; found some sherry, had an egg beaten up in it, and carried it back to her. Charlotte took it, and gazed at him through her blinding tears.

"You put me more and more in mind of her every day, Thomas. Not in looks—they say, you know, that you are more like our dead father, whom you cannot remember, and I only slightly—but in thoughtful care for others."

Dr. Tyndal came in as Charlotte was speaking. She drank her pleasant dose at a draught, and stood with her brother and the physician round the boy's bed. Fairfax was rambling again. The doctor said very little, except that he hoped and thought the lad would be better in the morning. He suggested one or two slight remedies, and gave him, with his own hands, a teaspoonful of the medicine. Mrs. Lowther intimated that she was about to telegraph to Belgium for her husband.

"You will go to the office and send the message for me, won't you, Thomas?" she said.

Mr. Kage nodded his head in the affirmative, and went down with the man of medicine.

"*Don't* telegraph!" cried the doctor, emphatically, drawing Thomas Kage into a room only lighted by the street-lamps. "Poor Lowther is up to his eyes in work over there; he won't thank even his wife for disturbing him needlessly. Before to-morrow morning there'll be a change of some sort. If, as I

believe, the boy shall then be out of danger, there will be no need of him; if it's the other change, time enough to summon him then."

"It is your true opinion—that the boy will get over it?"

"It is. A great deal depends upon the care and nursing he gets for the next twelve hours. His mother and the nurse are three-parts worn out."

"I intend to sit up with him."

"All right. You heard my directions?"

"Distinctly. I understand."

The doctor departed, and Thomas Kage went up again. He told Charlotte what he intended to do—sit up with the boy, and, if God so willed, bring him through it. But for her distress, she would have laughed at the idea of his turning nurse. He carried his point, however. Charlotte and the maid lay down for their needed rest, and Thomas Kage took charge of the patient. He had leisure to *think* in that long night-watch. Not at first; all his attention and care were needed for hours. At four o'clock in the morning the lad fell asleep, and Thomas knew he was saved; and that the need for sending for Mr. Lowther was over. As he sat back in the easy-chair afterwards, still as a mouse, a gleam of sunshine came in to illumine his heart. Every hope of happiness for himself seemed over; but life might yet have pleasant work for him in unselfishly helping his fellow-wayfarers.

"And that, after all, must be the true way to attain to the End," mused Thomas Kage. "Only through tribulation can we forget self, and enter its narrow path. I am glad I came in here."

CHAPTER XII.

THE SHADOW OF THE FUTURE.

The rejoicings at the christening of an heir to the goodly estate of the Rock were beginning to die away in neighbouring ears. The bonfires were burnt out, the ashes of the fireworks scattered to the far winds, the tenants and labourers had digested the

dinner and the drink, and things had quietly settled down again. Such rejoicings! both indoors and out: and all because a poor little infant had come into this world of trouble. Legally speaking, he was not born the heir, for the estate was not entailed, and Mr. Canterbury, its owner, could bequeath it to whom he would. Little danger, though, that he would leave it away from this child of his old age. No urchin, playing at soldiers in a sword and feather bought at the fair, was ever half so vain-glorious as was Mr. Canterbury over this new baby.

The child was born on the 18th of August, which had also been, rather singularly, his mother's wedding-day twelve months before. Only one short twelvemonth! and yet strange changes had taken place in it. The Miss Canterburys had quitted the Rock, and Mrs. Kage spent so much of her time there, that it might almost be said she had made it her home.

Lydia Dunn's prophecy—that her sisters would be driven from their home by its new mistress—had turned out to be a true one; and that lady of strong common sense would have been full of self-gratulation accordingly, but for the indignant pity that was burning her to her fingers' ends.

Young Mrs. Canterbury, indulged to folly by her husband, had commenced her sway at her new home as if she thought the world was made exclusively for her. At first—quite at first—she seemed inclined to be pleasant, and to consider others as well as herself; but she speedily fell into the mistake, that some, in a similar position, had made before her—that of seeking to bend every one by whom she was surrounded to her own sovereign and capricious will. It is possible that she might not have tried to break the peace of the Miss Canterburys, but for the secret urging of her mother. Nay, it is not too much to say that Caroline might have been sufficiently well-disposed towards them, might have allowed them to be happy in their father's home in her indifferent, thoughtless temperament, but for the secret promptings of Mrs. Kage. *She* wanted them out of it.

The young ladies bore in silence as long as they could. They *wished* to bear, and to be considerate to their father's wife, yielding to her all proper deference. But when it came to opposing their will and petty galling tyranny, to tacit but

very palpable insult, then Olive turned. Not in the same spirit, but grandly and loftily, essaying to bring reasoning and calm remonstrance to bear upon the matter. Young Mrs. Canterbury resented it, and unpleasantness ensued. Mrs. Kage, like an amiable fox, stepped in to heal the breach, and made it ten times wider.

It was impossible but that Olive should detect the motive of all this—to drive them from the Rock, so that it might be left entirely free for Mrs. Canterbury and her mother. She appealed to Mr. Canterbury. There was appealing and counter-appealing. That gentleman threw the whole blame back on his daughters. He was quite honest in doing it, for he could only believe them to be in fault. Had an angel whispered to him that his wife could be wrong, he would have disbelieved it. With his new idol by his side in all her beauty, and the Honourable Mrs. Kage whispering insidious suspicions into his ear every other hour in the day, how could it be otherwise? Ere Christmas had well turned, the ill-fated young ladies could bear it no longer, and were compelled to acknowledge themselves driven from their childhood's home, to find refuge elsewhere. It was arranged that they should remove to a pretty house on the estate called Thornhedge Villa: Mr. Canterbury setting them up with all things he thought necessary, including a carriage, and covenanting to allow them fifteen hundred a-year. He assumed that it would be only a temporary separation; that they would soon "make it up" with his wife and return to the Rock. "Oh, of course, dear sir, nothing but temporary; they will speedily come to their senses," said Mrs. Kage, gently acquiescent.

And so, on a cold, bitter day in February, when the icicles hung from the trees, and snow was falling, George Canterbury's daughters went out of their luxurious home, to take possession of the comparatively humble dwelling, Thornhedge Villa.

One great feature in the programme of young Mrs. Canterbury's visions had to be dispensed with—the season in London. How ardently she had anticipated it, none save herself could tell. The presentation at Court, with its attendant outlet for gratified vanity—the opera-box, the balls, the park, the thousand-and-one features of aristocratic London life—had all to

be postponed to another year. Ere the time fixed for removing thither—April—Caroline had fallen into so weak and suffering a state of health, that she herself was not the last to know and say she could not stir from the Rock. George Canterbury, while bewailing the fact in great anxiety, felt nevertheless quite aglow with pride and hope, in his consciousness that it was within the range of probability an heir would in course of time be born to him. The neighbours for miles round hoped the anticipated-heir would turn out a girl; for they were brimful of sympathy for the wrongs of George Canterbury's daughters.

And so the time went on to August, and on the 18th of that month doubts and fears were solved by the little child's birth—a boy.

But the year, apart from their sorrow, had not been altogether destitute of event for the Miss Canterburys. Jane was engaged to be married. An attachment had existed for some time between her and Mr. Rufort, the new Rector of Chilling. Just before Christmas he had made formal proposals for her to Mr. Canterbury, and been accepted. His father, Lord Rufort, offered no objection to the match; but he privately told his son he ought to have done much better in point of family. Austin laughed. His reverence for "family" was not so great as his father's; and the stern old lord condescended to say that Miss Jane Canterbury's wealth would in a great degree atone for the other deficiency.

It was a fine night in the beginning of October. The rejoicings at the birth of the heir had died away, as already said, and Chilling was quiet again. Mr. Rufort was spending the evening with the Miss Canterburys at Thornhedge Villa; which, in point of fact, was nothing unusual. They had drawn away from the lights to collect round the large French window of the drawing-room; it opened to the sloping lawn, with its beds of geraniums and other sweet autumn flowers. The night was very beautiful—calm, still, and clear: the hunter's moon shone brightly in the heavens. It was growing time for Mr. Rufort to depart. They had had some music, had talked of various subjects of interest, gossip and else, and so the evening had rapidly passed. Only that day week they had been at the Rock, at the christening of the

little baby boy. A fearfully grand affair, that christening. Mr. Rufort, as Rector of Chilling, had only assisted at it; nobody less than a bishop was allowed to perform the ceremony. In quitting the Rock as their residence, the Miss Canterburys—gentle, right-minded ladies—had not brought matters to a rupture. Amicable relations existed, so to say, still, at which the Honourable Mrs. Kage looked on with a green, wary, jealous eye. Only this very afternoon, Mrs. Canterbury's carriage had stopped at Thornhedge Villa, and Mrs. Canterbury herself, lovely and more blooming than ever, had come in to pay a visit. One fact the young ladies could not help noticing: that they were not encouraged to go to the Rock at will. If invited on any chance state occasion, well and good; but otherwise they were not expected at it. Ah, they had a great deal to bear! But the evening was over; Mr. Rufort could not linger, and shook hands with them.

"I may as well go out this way," he observed, opening the half-window.

"But your hat," said Miss Canterbury. "Ring, Millicent."

"Do not ring; I have it here," he interposed, taking from his pocket a cloth cap, doubled into a small compass. "There," said he, exhibiting it on his hand for their inspection; "what do you think of it? I call it my weather-cap. If I am fetched out at night, I put on this, tie it over my ears, and so defy wind and rain."

"You had no wind or rain to-night," remarked Millicent.

"No; but in coming out I could not find my hat. It is a failing of mine, that of losing my things in all corners of the house. I sadly want some one to keep me in order," he added, looking at Jane.

"Some men never can be kept in order," interposed Millicent rather saucily, with a touch of her old light spirit, which, from some cause or other, had been sadly heavy for a long while.

"I am not one of those," laughingly replied Mr. Rufort. "Well, good night. Jane, you may as well come as far as the gate with me."

Jane glanced at Olive as she would have glanced to a mother; Miss Canterbury had been regarded by the others almost in

the light of one. Mr. Rufort held the glass-door wide for her, and she stepped on to the gravel-path; he then closed the window, and held out his arm. Jane finished tying her pocket-handkerchief round her throat, and took it. He walked bare-headed.

"Put on your cap, Austin."

"All in good time," he replied.

"You will take cold."

"Cold, Jane! A clergyman is not fit for his work if he cannot stand for an hour with his head uncovered in bad weather—and to-night is fine. If you saw the model of a guy this elegant cap makes of me and my beauty, you might take it in your head to reject me."

Jane smiled; her own quiet, confiding smile: and Mr. Rufort looked at her, and drew her arm closer against his side.

"Jane, I had a selfish motive in bringing you out with me. It was to tell you that the Rectory wants a mistress, and the parish wants a mistress, and I want a wife. We cannot get along as we are."

"Mr. Annesley had no——" wife, Jane was going to say, but stopped herself ere the word fell. "The Rectory and the parish had no mistress in his time," she resumed, framing her answer more to her satisfaction, "and he got along, Austin."

"After a fashion: a miserable fashion it must have been. That's one reason why things have fallen into their present state. *I* don't mean to let them be without one long."

Like the arguments of a great many more people, Mr. Rufort's, strictly examined, would not have held water. If the late Rector had not (for many years at least) had a wife, the Rectory and the parish had had in his daughter an efficient mistress. Mr. Rufort, so far, was only speaking in jest, as Jane knew.

"Here we are at the gate," she said. "And now I must go back, or Olive will be calling to me. She is watching me from the window, I am sure, to see that I don't linger."

"Not she. She knows you are safe with me."

"Oh, certainly; but she is always fancying we shall take cold."

"You take cold? I declare I forgot that. I beg your

pardon for my thoughtlessness, Jane. Well, then, I will not keep you now, but I shall speak further to-morrow."

He threw his arm round her waist with a quick movement, and drew her behind the shrubbery which skirted the gate, so that they were hidden from the house. And there he imprinted kiss after kiss upon her unresisting face.

"Oh, my goodness!" groans the fastidious reader. "A clergyman!"

Well, of course it was grievously improper. But, as it did happen, where's the use of hypocritically concealing it?

"Jane, my darling," he murmured, "I must have you at the Rectory before Christmas. Think it over."

"As you will," she softly answered.

With the last kiss Mr. Rufort opened the gate, swung through it, and took the path that led to the Rectory. Jane stood a moment to watch him. She saw him put on his "guy of a cap;" saw him turn and nod to her in the moonlight: and she clasped her hands together with a movement of happy thankfulness, thinking how very much she loved him. Olive, anxious on the score of the night-air, for she did not fancy Jane was particularly strong, tapped at the window, and the young lady ran in.

The following afternoon, as the Miss Canterburys were crossing the Rock-field, as it was called, on their way home, they saw Mr. Rufort at a distance. He turned to meet them; but his step seemed slow and weary; his face wore a vexed, grave look. Millicent noticed it.

"He has been annoyed with some parish business or other," surmised Olive; "though it must be more than a trifle to affect Mr. Rufort. I must say, Jane, you will have a good-tempered husband. If Austin has no other excellent quality, he has that of a sweet temper."

"I think he has a great many others," returned Jane in her quiet way. And Olive laughed.

Mr. Rufort came up. After a minute spent in greeting, he touched Jane, and caused her to slacken her pace. Miss Canterbury and Millicent walked on. "Jane," said he, when the distance between them had increased, "what is this barrier that has come, or is coming, between us?"

Jane Canterbury looked at him for a few moments in silent surprise. His face was pale; he was evidently agitated. "I do not know what you are speaking of, Austin," she said at length.

"My father rode over to-day, and told me, without any preparation or circumlocution, that things must be at an end between us. And when I asked him what he meant, and wherefore it was to be, he said I might ask that of Mr. Canterbury. Have you heard anything?"

"Nothing," said Jane—"nothing." And her look of consternation too plainly indicated that she had not. "But did Lord Rufort give you no further explanation?"

"I could get nothing else from him. He was in that inaccessible humour of his, which is a sure indication that something has gone wrong. He did not get off his horse. Mrs. Kage, who in passing had stepped inside the Rectory-gate to look at my autumn flowers, was with me in the garden when he rode up. He made a sign to me with his whip, and I went out. The groom had drawn up close behind, and my father, seeing this, said, 'Ride on, sir,' and of course Richard rode on. I knew by the sharp tone all was not smooth; and then he told me what I have said to you, just in so many words."

Jane's heart was beating.

"What was it he meant about my father?"

"I asked an explanation. He seemed too angry, or too—if I may use the word—too lofty to give it; and said I had best inquire that of Mr. Canterbury. 'Or of the neighbourhood either, for it is no secret,' he added, as he rode off, barely lifting his hat to Mrs. Kage, who had come to the gate."

"Papa was with us this morning," observed Jane. "He appeared just the same as usual, and did not hint at anything being amiss; indeed, he was joking with me, and asked when I meant to take up my residence at the Rectory. Do you think there can be any mistake—any misapprehension on Lord Rufort's part?"

"Misapprehension of what?" debated Mr. Rufort, standing still as he asked the question.

She could not say; she could not imagine what, any more than he. Both were completely at sea. One fact was indis-

putable—that Lord Rufort, sedate, sure, cautious, was the last man in the world to take up a mistaken notion, no matter what it might relate to. That some trouble or other had arisen, they felt very certain; and a miserable sense of discomfort took possession of both. Mr. Rufort was the first to speak.

"Whatsoever it may be, Jane, let us prepare to meet it," he impressively said, laying his hand upon her arm, and gazing into her eyes. "We are no longer children, and may not be dealt with as such. To fly in the face of parental authority and marry in defiance of it, is what, with our professed feelings and principles, we could neither of us do; but on the other hand, no father, whether yours or mine, can be justified in attempting to separate us. Therefore, should a storm be bursting over our heads, we will wait with what patience we may until it is weathered, implicitly trusting in each other's faith, secure in each other's love. Do you understand me, my dearest?"

"Yes," she sighed; "and I think you are right, Austin. I promise to be guided by you in all things. I know you will not lead me wrong."

He took her hand and clasped it. They were in the open field, or he might have taken something else. "Then we rest secure in mutual faith and truth," he said, as they began to walk on. "Whatsoever shall betide, you are still mine: remember that, Jane."

Olive and Millicent had stopped, and were looking back. Olive thought they seemed agitated, and she wondered: the calm, easy-mannered minister, the sensible, tranquil Jane. Could anything be wrong?

"Walk on and wait at the stile," said Miss Canterbury to Millicent, whom she was a little apt to consider a child still. And so Millicent went on, and Olive took a few steps backwards to meet them.

"Is anything amiss, Mr. Rufort?"

"Austin, let us tell Olive," was Jane's hurried whisper.

"Of course," he answered. "I intended to do so."

Olive listened to his explanation, and smiled a little as she did so. In her way she was every whit as lofty as Lord Rufort, in mind and manner too. That anything could be supposed

to happen sufficient to separate Jane and Austin Rufort, short of their own free will, she looked upon in the light of a simple absurdity. Mistakes, misapprehensions, were common enough in the world, she observed; this must be one of them.

"Not the least intelligible part of the whole is, that my father should have said it was no secret in the neighbourhood," observed Mr. Rufort.

"Yes, that certainly sounds a little curious," assented Olive.

"The most feasible construction I can put upon it is, that his lordship and Mr. Canterbury may have had some quarrel," continued Mr. Rufort. "Though how my father can construe that into a reason for my giving up Jane, I cannot conceive. He is not an unjust man."

"I feel thoroughly sure that when we saw papa this morning, he had had no quarrel whatever with Lord Rufort," replied Olive; "and I feel almost as sure that they have not met since. Papa left us before one o'clock to go home to an early luncheon, for he and Mrs. Canterbury were going out afterwards to pay some visit; and we saw the carriage drive by with them."

"They cannot have met Lord Rufort, and—and—had any disagreement then?" hesitated Jane.

"Nonsense, Jane," reproved Olive; "they would not dispute in the presence of Mrs. Canterbury. To suppose either of them likely to dispute, under any circumstances, seems to me excessively improbable. Who is it that Leta is talking to over the stile so eagerly?—Oh, Mr. Carlton?"

"Is it Carlton?" cried the Rector. "They are discussing the world's private affairs, then, for he hears all the gossip and can keep nothing in. But I must leave you for the present, Miss Canterbury. I shall see you to-night.—Good-bye, Jane."

He struck across the field, and they walked on leisurely towards the stile. Millicent turned, and ran back to meet them in haste and unmistakable excitement.

"What is it, Leta?" asked Miss Canterbury.

"Oh, Olive!" was the reply, and Millicent was breathless as she spoke it, "I don't fully understand what it is. Mr. Carlton has been telling me something about papa."

"What has he been telling you?"

Millicent entered on the tale as succinctly as her agitation

permitted her. Between that, and her own imperfect knowledge, it was not made very clear. It appeared that as she reached the stile, when sent forward by Olive, their old friend, Mr. Carlton of Chilling Hall, was passing down the road in his pony-gig. Seeing Millicent, he stopped, got out, and went up to her.

"My dear," he began, without greeting or circumlocution, "tell your sisters that I have refused to act, for I will never have a hand in robbing them or you."

"In robbing us, Mr. Carlton!" was Leta's surprised rejoinder.

"To give your patrimony to others and turn you out penniless is a robbery, and nothing less," continued Mr. Carlton. "Therefore I have informed my old friend Canterbury that he must get some one else to help him in his injustice, for I won't. Tell your sisters this, my dear; and tell them that if they should be stripped of their rights, they shall come to the Hall and be my daughters."

This was what had passed; and what Millicent now repeated to her sisters nearly word for word.

"Was this all?" asked Olive, as the recital ceased.

"All," said Millicent. "Mr. Carlton had to run on to the pony, which would not stand, and I came to you. What can it mean, Olive? Does Mrs. Canterbury wish papa to take from us the income he allows us, and turn us from Thornhedge Villa, as she did—for it was her doing—from the Rock?"

"No," answered Miss Canterbury, drawing her head up in her haughty way, "papa will not allow her to go so far as that, I think. The world must have got hold of some preposterous and improbable invention, and poor Mr. Carlton has heard it. He takes in everything, whether true or false. Why, Millicent, you could have contradicted it on the spot. Was not papa with us this morning, kind as ever?"

"This is what has reached the ears of Lord Rufort, then," remarked Jane.

"No doubt. Lord Rufort is known to be a gold-worshipper, and Austin's living is small. How can so improbable a tale have arisen?"

When they reached the stile, the first object visible was Mr.

Carlton, standing by his pony-gig a short way down the road. Something was amiss with the harness, and he was setting it to rights. "Mr. Carlton, where did you pick up that sublime information?" inquired Olive, walking up to him.

"What information?" asked he, busy with his straps and buckles.

"That we are to be consigned to the union to-morrow, and our house and furniture sold to the highest bidder, plate included?" she said, with good-humoured sarcasm.

"Did Leta tell you that?"

"Something equivalent to it," laughed Olive.

"She did, did she? A young goose! I perceive you have kept it from her: I saw she did not understand me; so I laid the blame on my pony, poor quiet creature, and flew away from her, without saying more. Miss Olive, I am truly sorry; this infatuation of your father's has given me a sleepless night. Had I ever supposed this was to be the upshot, I'd have seen Mrs. Kage hanged before consenting to stand father-in-church at the wedding."

Olive felt herself in the dark. And it was not a pleasant darkness by any means. "Will you please inform me what there is to be sorry for, Mr. Carlton, and what is the nature of my father's 'infatuation'? There's many a foolish tale concocted in the village club-room."

Mr. Carlton turned from his harness to gaze at her. He was a genial-looking man, with a ruddy countenance, silver hair, and dark, pleasant eyes. "Are you asking me this seriously, Olive? Or are you carrying on a jest with me?"

"Nay," said Olive, "are you carrying on a jest with us? Is there, or is there not, anything to tell? Papa was with us this morning; he hinted at nothing; he was as kind and talkative as usual."

"Then you don't know it?" cried Mr. Carlton in amaze.

"I know nothing. What is there to know?"

"My dear Miss Olive, I surely believed you knew all—more, indeed, than I do. I thought I understood from Mr. Canterbury that his daughters were privy to the arrangement; I fully thought he said so. It must have been my own mistake."

Olive waited; she supposed he would come to the point

in time. Mr. Carlton appeared to be revolving matters whilst he stood. Suddenly he struck the shaft of the gig with emphasis.

"Well, I *don't* regret having told you, my dear. No, I don't. It would be a cruel thing for it to come upon you like a thunderbolt when he was gone."

"But you have not told me, Mr. Carlton. See how patiently I am waiting to hear it."

"Your father dropped me a note some days ago saying he was about to make his will, and asking me if I would oblige him by being one of the executors," began Mr. Carlton, plunging into the story. "I dropped a note back to say 'Yes.' But I reminded him that I was born in the same year as himself, and that his life, so far as any one knew, was just as good as mine. Don't you think it is, Miss Olive?"

"Yes. Pray go on."

"Well, the will was prepared; and I concluded we should have been called upon to sign shortly. But yesterday morning when I was at the Rock, in talking of it with Mr. Canterbury, I said to him—just as old friends do say such things to each other—that I hoped he had taken good care of his daughters. And, to my utter surprise, I found he had cut you off with the most paltry sum conceivable—five thousand each." A spot of vermilion shone forth from Miss Canterbury's cheeks. They burnt like fire. "So I told him I would be no executor to that will, and therefore, if he could not make a better, he must find some one else to act; I wouldn't. And away I came in a huff, and nearly fell over Mrs. Canterbury, who was at the study-door when I opened it. Miss Olive"—and the speaker dropped his voice to a whisper, as if afraid the pony might hear, or the hedges on either side—"I think young madam must have been listening: though I wouldn't have such a hint get abroad for all the money ever coined. And her mother was peeping her old face round the boudoir-door *seeing* that she did it."

"The property is left to Mrs. Canterbury!" remarked Olive, her eyes flashing.

"Of course. To her and the boy between them. I was too hot and vexed to retain the particulars, but I can get them

if I want to. Its being willed away from you and your sisters was too much for me. Why, Miss Olive, the least he could do, would be to leave you fifty thousand a-piece, seeing that you were but lately heiresses to all. Or let him be *just*, in spite of his new wife and boy, and halve the whole."

Old friend though Mr. Carlton was, almost like a second father, Olive Canterbury almost disdained to discuss the affair with him. It was not the loss of the money, so much as the injustice itself that angered her.

"How did this family-matter get abroad?" she asked somewhat abruptly.

"Oh, it is known everywhere," was the Irish answer. "We were talking about it at the magistrates' meeting at Aberton yesterday."

"Who told it there?" persisted Olive. "Did you?"

"I don't think I did; I am not sure, though. I know we began talking of it all in a hurry, and forgot to send up the memorial about a prisoner to the Secretary of State. When the meeting was over, Lord Rufort came out with me, and asked me the particulars."

"Your poor tongue!" thought Olive.

"And that's all, my dear. And don't you forget, if this wholesale thieving is carried out and you are deprived of your own, that there's more than room for you and Leta at the Hall —Jane will be at the Rectory, I suppose. You must come to it, and be my daughters."

He shook her hand as he spoke, and, hastily ascending to his gig, drove off out of her sight, for his eyes were filling. Miss Canterbury went back to her sisters, who had waited for her at the stile.

"I cannot stay to say anything now, Jane," hastily spoke Olive, purposely anticipating questions. "Walk home with Millicent, will you? I am going into Chilling again."

"To Chilling!"

"Yes, I have business there."

She was accustomed to rule things in this decisive way, and they never thought of questioning it. But Jane glanced at her watch. Their dinner-hour was six, and it wanted only half-an-hour to it.

"If you go back now, Olive, you will not be home in time to dress."

"Then I must dispense with dressing for one evening—or with dinner," was the reply; and Olive's tone as she spoke was very bitter.

Leaving her sisters standing in surprise, Miss Canterbury went back through the field-path; it was rather shorter than the roadway. To say she felt indignant at the news breathed into her ear, would not be saying half enough; but the first thing to be done was to ascertain if the tale were true, for Mr. Carlton's information was not always to be depended on. He was as a very woman for gossip, and sometimes, quite unconsciously to himself, took up an aspect of reports that was afterwards found to be quite the reverse of fact. That no one but Mr. Norris, the family solicitor, would be employed upon legal business by her father, she felt sure. His office was at Aberton; his residence at Chilling, not far from the parsonage. He was a man in extensive practice, and moved in good society. Olive went straight to his house, and found he had just returned home. Mr. Norris came to her in the drawing-room. The young ladies knew him well; but, in spite of his mixing with them on an apparent equality, Olive was quite conscious of the real distance that existed. It peeped out this evening in her manner: and in her heart she was resenting his having been in any way a participator in making so unjust a will. She turned to face him as he came in, and spoke without any complimentary preface, her air and voice full of command.

"Mr. Norris, what is this I hear about my father's will?"

"How have you heard it?" was the rejoinder of Mr. Norris.

Olive darted a glance at him from beneath her haughty eyelids, which plainly inquired by what right he put the question; and the lawyer understood it perfectly. "I heard it in the same way that others have heard it; it is the common topic of the neighbourhood. Did you make it for him?"

"I did. The reason I inquired where you had heard it, Miss Canterbury, was that I hoped it might have been from himself. I think if Mr. Canterbury would only converse with his daughters respecting it, he might be brought to see his decision in a different light. Pray be seated, Miss Canterbury."

"I prefer to stand. Will you give me the heads of the will?"

"I find that its particulars have really got abroad, so that I can have no scruple in doing so," he replied. "I cannot but think Mr. Carlton is the traitor: not an intentional one, poor man; but, if ever a secret does get intrusted to him, it is a secret no longer."

"What is the amount willed to me and my sisters?" impatiently interrupted Miss Canterbury.

"Five thousand pounds each."

"Shameful!" responded her heart. "And the rest to Mrs. Canterbury?" she inquired aloud.

"Mrs. Canterbury has her settlement, and a very large sum besides; but the bulk of the property is left to the infant. In case of its death, it becomes Mrs. Canterbury's."

"All of it?"

"All. It passes to her absolutely and unconditionally.

"Does the Rock pass to her?"

"The Rock, and also its large revenues."

"Mr. Norris, do you call this a just will?"

"It is the most unjust will I ever made!" he replied with warmth. "I said so to Mr. Canterbury. I assure you, Miss Canterbury, that if you and your sisters have been thus dealt by, it was not for want of remonstrance on my part. All I could venture to urge, in my position as legal adviser, I did urge; but Mr. Canterbury has in this instance proved himself a self-willed client."

"My father must have been influenced, as he has been in other matters," remarked Miss Canterbury. And Mr. Norris's raised eyebrows and expression of countenance told that he more than agreed with her. "Is the will signed?"

"No. There is some delay in consequence of Mr. Carlton's refusing to act as executor. When he heard what were the provisions of the will, he turned on Mr. Canterbury and said he would not act. He came to my office at Aberton, and told me. Carlton said he had hitherto managed to keep his hands from dabbling with injustice, and hoped to do so still."

"Who are the other executors?"

"There is only one other named—Mrs. Canterbury."

"Oh," said Olive.

"Since Mr. Carlton's refusal to act, I have seen Mr. Canterbury, and again urged upon him that a more equitable disposal should be made. I gained nothing by it, I fear."

"What was Mr. Canterbury's reply?"

"He said that he had been advised it was not an unequitable disposal; that a wife and son generally inherited to the exclusion of daughters."

"Advised!" scornfully ejaculated Olive. "Mrs. Kage has had to do with this—more than Mrs. Canterbury. Does he call five thousand pounds a fitting portion for us, brought up in the luxury as we have been, and with our expectations?"

"I submitted that question to him, Miss Canterbury, almost in the very words you have used. He replied, that you already inherited five thousand pounds each by the death of your mother—as is the case—and that five thousand more would make it ten thousand."

"Ten thousand pounds for the daughters of Mr. Canterbury of the Rock!" was Olive's resentful comment.

"Ten thousand, all told," quietly replied the lawyer. "Mrs. Kage has a like sum."

"A like sum! Bequeathed by my father?"

Mr. Norris inclined his head in the affirmative.

Olive's breath left her. A hundred remonstrances rose to her mind, a hundred indignant protests to her lips. So many, so tumultuous were they, that none were uttered.

"Is there no appeal, no redress against these unjust wills?" she exclaimed, when her silence had spent itself.

"The only appeal can lie in getting the testator to revoke them," he replied, looking meaningly at Miss Canterbury. "When once the testator has passed away, the will becomes law, and must be carried out. I will urge the bearings of the case again on Mr. Canterbury, but——"

"No," interrupted Miss Canterbury, "it is his family who must urge it upon him: if only to save his name from reproach."

"I was about to say so," returned the lawyer. "It is Mr. Canterbury's family—in fact, *you*, Miss Canterbury, who must deal with this. If you cannot prevail with him, no one can; there's not a chance of it." Olive knew it well. "I will delay

the execution of the will as long as possible, Miss Canterbury, in the hope that I may be furnished with instructions to make a different one. I told Mr. Canterbury I would charge nothing for drawing a fresh one out. Not—pardon me—to save his pocket, but that he might see how urgent I considered the necessity to be."

"Thank you, Mr. Norris," frankly spoke Olive. "I was blaming you in my heart when I came in, but I perceive no fault lies with you."

She shook hands with him. He attended her to the door, and she departed on her walk back across the Rock-field, plunged in deep reflection. That this terrible, barefaced act of injustice was owing almost entirely to Mrs. Kage, Olive felt sure. Caroline, let alone, would never have thought of being so grasping. And Olive was right. In point of fact, that honourable lady had been feathering her nest pretty considerably ever since the marriage. Her daughter largely helped her; there could be no question of it. Mrs. Kage's former modest household of two servants had been augmented by a smart lady's-maid named Fry. A beautiful pony-carriage, kept at the Rock, was devoted to her special service, and Mrs. Kage, with a parasol in one hand and scent-bottle in the other, went about in it, driven by a natty boy-groom. A close carriage was at her service whenever she chose to send and order it. Her table was munificently supplied with the choicest fruit from the Rock-gardens when she did not dine at the Rock. Fish and other delicacies came daily to her from Aberton. Her attire was now magnificent, especially in respect of costly old lace, and pinching in money-matters was at an end. In short, Mrs. Kage's lines had dropped into pleasant places; and there could be no question that her daughter's marriage with George Canterbury had brought *to her* all its hoped-for realization.

This assistance might have been carried out for her mother twice over, had Mrs. Canterbury so pleased, and no one found fault with it. To Mr. Canterbury's great wealth it was as a drop of water to the ocean. But to will away the daughters' inheritance was a very different affair; and so little necessity was there for anything of the kind, Mr. Canterbury's riches being amply sufficient to provide munificently for all, that a

doubt crossed Olive, as she walked along the field, of Mrs. Kage's sanity. Tracing events back, she could see that it was all a part of one deep-laid scheme; and Mrs. Kage had driven them from the Rock to have room to work it out. The birth of the child had been made a pretext for Mrs. Kage's taking up her abode at the Rock; she had not yet come away from it. With that wily, plotting, soft-speaking woman ever at his elbow, Olive felt that her chance of being heard to effect was very small indeed. Bitterly she deplored her father's pliant, yielding disposition, and the strange ascendency it had enabled the new wife and the crafty mother-in-law to gain over him.

When she reached home, she imparted the news to her sisters; and they spent the evening talking it over with Mr. Rufort. It was decided that Olive should proceed to the Rock the following day, and see what impression she could make upon her father.

"I heartily wish you success, Miss Canterbury," were Mr. Rufort's last words to her, when he was leaving.

"You cannot wish it more than I do. Putting our own interests aside, I would not that my father, for his own sake, should leave behind him so unjust a will, for his name would lie under obloquy for ever." But, notwithstanding the words, there lay an instinct on Miss Canterbury's heart that she should *not* prevail; and the whole night long she never closed her eyes.

She reached the Rock in the morning between eleven and twelve, when she knew her father would most probably be alone in the library. The initiative of the visit was not propitious. The servant who opened the door to her happened to be a fresh one; a fine gentleman just arrived from London as own footman to Mrs. Canterbury. Olive walked straight into the hall without speaking. The man stared, and then seemed to recollect something.

"I beg your parding, mem—might you be Miss Canterbury?"

"I am Miss Canterbury," Olive condescended to reply, though she considered the question, and the manner too, somewhat impertinent.

The man placed himself in her way as she was walking on

towards the library. "Then if you please, mem, will you step into this nere parlour? You are not to go in, mem."

Olive turned her lofty face upon him. He did not altogether like its air of command, and resumed with civility. "Mem, Mrs. Kage told me that you was not to go in to Mr. Canterbury should you happen to call, but was to be showed in here, and herself fetched down to you. She ordered it, mem, and I could not think of disobeying her."

"Sir!" burst out Olive, "do you know to whom you speak? I am in my father's house. Stand aside!" He stood aside, foolish and humble, and at that same moment the butler came forward. "Neel," said she, in a calm, almost indifferent tone, "you had better tell that man who I am; he does not appear to understand, I think."

Neel, all astonishment, gazed at the new footman, whom he did not particularly favour, from head to foot; and turned to usher Miss Canterbury into his master's presence. In passing through the hall, the door of one of the drawing-rooms was flung back, and the nurse came out, carrying the baby. Olive, unthinkingly, turned her head to look in. There, talking together face to face, stood Mrs. Canterbury and Thomas Kage.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT THE ROCK.

Only the beginning of October; but the woods and dales around Chilling were variegated with the autumn foliage; the Welsh hills, stretching out in the distance, looked gay with their light and shade; the skies were blue and cloudless—all beautiful, as seen from the windows of that fine mansion, the Rock.

In one of its gorgeous drawing-rooms, newly furnished and decorated to suit the taste and pleasure of the new wife, and quite shining with mirrors and gilding and resplendent vanities, sat Mrs. Canterbury, young and lovely as when her husband had brought her home fourteen months before; but ten times

vainer, ten times more self-willed than she had been even then. She was attired in a morning robe of fine white French cambric, fancifully embroidered, and much adorned with rich pink ribbons and delicate lace; and—though her sunny curls were far too youthful for it—she wore a little cap of the same pink ribbons and lace.

At a distance, half reclining on a soft velvet ottoman, with one cushion propping her back and another under her feet, was her mother, the Honourable Mrs. Kage, all nerves and languishment as usual, but looking a little more faded than ordinary in the clear morning light. How many weeks had elapsed since Mrs. Kage had taken up her abode at the Rock, and how many more she intended to remain, she kept a discreet silence upon. Its luxurious quarters were on a different scale from those of her own home, and exceedingly agreeable.

Seated near Mrs. Canterbury was a gentleman who had only now entered—entered unexpectedly, and given to her heart a wild flutter of joyous confusion, married though she was. Perhaps his heart fluttered too, for he had once thought her more of an angel than man, young ardent man, often thinks woman. If so, nothing of it was betrayed by his manner, which was calm, equable, pleasant at the very most, as a well-regulated, self-controlled man's should be under the circumstances, whatever feelings may be stirring within him. It was Thomas Kage.

"Do you find me altered?" she was asking him, with rising blushes and a tremor that could not be concealed.

"Altered for the better. I never saw you looking so well, or so——"

"So what?" returned she, in her conscious vanity.

"So fascinating, Caroline. I know not why I should have hesitated; for such praise, honestly given, cannot do harm to a married woman." But the word was spoken without the smallest warmth; for all the admiration *he* displayed, he might just as well have said "so ugly." In the midst of her amusement, Mrs. Canterbury felt a latent pique.

"I think that must be a new theory. Is it one of your own?"

"I should have said, *ought* not," he replied, correcting the former phrase. "How is Mr. Canterbury this morning?"

"Oh, he is very well!" was the careless answer. "He is always in his study from ten till twelve, occupied with his tenants and his farm-business and all that trumpery."

"I am glad to see you so happy, Caroline," continued Mr. Kage; and he certainly spoke heartily now. "I trust you have found the bliss in your married life that you hoped for—found it in all ways?"

"Yes, thank you, of course I have," she flippantly said, but with the crimson rising in her lovely cheeks. "Oh, Thomas," she continued in deeper tones, "do not let us play at talking fine with each other. You know that in marrying a man of—of—Mr. Canterbury's age, one does not expect a bower of bliss, all lilies and roses."

"Very true," he quietly replied; "one cannot have everything in the very brightest of marriages. You have a superfluity of luxury and wealth; and that, I expect, is what you married for."

"Of course, I have everything in that way—more than a superfluity," replied Mrs. Canterbury, her voice just a little fractious. "And then he is so fond of me! That's very tiresome." Mr. Kage slightly laughed. "I can tell you that it is," she emphatically repeated. "I must not go out at night, lest I take cold; I must not run out at will by day, lest I fatigue myself. I am not rheumatic, and I'm not quite sixty."

"All for your benefit, no doubt. I dare say you find it so."

"I might, if I tried it; but when he says I am not to go anywhere or do anything, I immediately go and do it. But I tell you what, Thomas," she added more earnestly, "I have found out that to have all your wishes fulfilled ere expressed, to know beforehand that your slightest whim will be carried out, does not bring happiness. It creates weariness and satiety, but never happiness. I often wish myself back in the old days, when we had only five hundred a-year, and I had to tease mamma before I could get a new dress bought. It seems now that to cut and contrive, and spin out our income, was a real pleasure: it was a daily object to live for, don't you see? Not that I would part with any of my present wealth; I wouldn't grumble if it were more."

"More, Mrs. Canterbury!" he exclaimed, and his astonishment was genuine. "If I had as many hundreds a-year as you have thousands, I should feel rich enough for an emperor."

"Are you going to call me *that?*" she asked, her countenance paling, her voice falling low, though the conversation could not be heard; for Mrs. Kage, buried in her distant cushions, and sniffing at her essence-bottles, turned neither ear nor heed nor thought to them. Before her daughter's marriage, it was high-treason for Thomas Kage to attempt to say a word to her. He might talk at will now.

"It is your name."

"Not to you. Surely I may be 'Caroline,' as before. What need is there of formality between cousins?"

"Just as you please," he said in a civil tone of acquiescence, but with nothing in it of a warmer feeling. "Some ladies would take offence at being addressed indiscriminately by their Christian name after marriage."

"How was it Mr. Canterbury met you last night?" she resumed. "I do not understand."

"Quite accidentally. I was leaving the railway station, on my arrival at Aberton, when his carriage drove past. He saw me, and stopped it, and made me promise to come over to-day."

"Which otherwise you would not have done," she quickly rejoined.

"Well, I had been fancying it might not be convenient to me to spare the time."

"I wonder Mr. Canterbury did not think to mention it. He went to a gentleman's dinner-party at Aberton last night, and was at home by eleven. But, do you know, it seems to me he has become forgetful of late? I don't think he can be remembering it at all, or he would be here."

"He is"—getting old, was on the tip of Thomas Kage's tongue; but he arrested the words in time. With that fair young wife before him, they would have sounded like a sin.

"And what have you been doing, Thomas, all these many months?"

"Working."

"We hear of you now and again at rare moments, through

Sarah Annesley or Mrs. Dunn, who both correspond with the Miss Canterburys."

"I scarcely ever see either of the two," he remarked. "Sarah Annesley goes sometimes to Mrs. Garston's, but her hours for calling are different from mine, and we only meet by chance."

"The deaf old body! Is she as exacting as ever?"

"Much the same," he answered, with a slight smile at the reminiscence. "I was surprised to hear that the Miss Canterburys had quitted the Rock. How was it?"

A faintly conscious red increased the delicate bloom on Caroline Canterbury's cheeks. She toyed for a moment with her watch-chain before replying. "All parties thought it better that they should have a home of their own. At Thornhedge Villa they are independent."

"And were they not so here?"

"Of course, in a degree. It does not do to have a second mistress in a house. I am sufficient, without Olive."

"Certainly. Was she a second mistress?"

"She wanted to be." Mrs. Canterbury might have added that Olive wanted to be so only in what concerned herself; but she had not yet learnt to be strictly honest in speech.

"I think your mamma looks considerably older, Caroline."

"Do you? She has put too much bloom on her cheeks this morning, and that always brings out the wrinkles. I wonder sometimes whether old people really look younger for sailing under false colours—rouge, dyed hair, powdered skin—or older?"

"Older, most decidedly," he said. "Never you touch such things, Caroline."

"I! It will be ages and ages before I require them."

She crossed the room to ring the bell, laughing as she did so, and then slipped out. The answer to the summons was a nurse with an infant. The young mother took him in her arms outside the door, and carried him to the window, where Mr. Kage was then standing, looking out.

"Is not mine a darling baby?"

He turned quickly, and saw her holding the child towards him. His calm pale face changed to hectic—a glowing carmine,

as bright as that on Mrs. Kage's, spreading even to the roots of his hair. It might have been caused by the suddenness of the surprise. Whatever the root of the emotion, it did not extend to his manner, and he rallied bravely.

"A fine child, indeed. Will you allow me to try my hand at nursing?"

Mrs. Canterbury put the infant into his arms.

"A fine child you call him! That is a compliment very wide of the mark, sir, or else it betrays how much you know about babies. He is not a fine child, for he is remarkably small: but he is a very pretty one. They say he has my eyes, and all my features."

"I think he is like you. One can never trace much resemblance to any one in these young faces."

"You seemed astonished, Thomas, when I brought him in. Did you not know of his birth?"

"Yes, I saw it in the *Times*. He was born just twelve months after your wedding-day."

"How did you know that?" she asked.

"I remembered the date—the 18th of August."

"What a memory you must have!" she said, rather flippantly—or it sounded so to his ears. "You are not half as awkward at holding him as Mr. Canterbury is," she continued, after a pause.

"No? Charlotte, my sister, says I am a first-rate nurse."

"Oh, poor creature—the idea of bringing *her* up! She has nine hundred children, has she not?"

"She has nine."

"Nine! that's nearly as bad. I hope I shall never have more than this one darling. I could not afford any love for another—he has it all."

"What is his name?"

"Thomas."

Mr. Kage looked up quickly. "Thom——" But his eager tone was changed for an indifferent one. "Who chose that old-fashioned name?"

"I chose it," she answered, casting down her drooping eyelids towards some point on the baby's dress. "I like the name."

The child suddenly discovered that he was in strange arms, and set up a scream; Mrs. Kage set up a louder, and dropping some of her scent-bottles, which she was never seen without, stopped her ears. Mrs. Canterbury laughed, and took the infant.

"Make *that* your object, Caroline," he whispered.

"My object! I don't understand."

"You were saying just now—at least, I understood you to imply it—that you had not much object in life. Make the training of your child your object; bring him up to *good*."

Mrs. Canterbury opened wide her violet-blue eyes.

"Good!" she echoed, wonderingly. "He will have good enough, in all reason, Thomas. He is born to loads of wealth."

"And without constant, never-tiring training, the wealth may prove but a snare and a delusion," he rejoined, a grave, earnest light in his honest dark eyes. "Precept must be upon precept, you know. 'Line upon line; here a little, and there a little.'"

You know! It had been with more reason had he said, "you do not know;" for Caroline Kage, now Caroline Canterbury, had never herself received any training of this kind whatsoever.

The nurse, quitting the room with the baby, had the door wide open, when some one passed it at the moment, and glanced in. Mrs. Kage, happening to be looking round from her sofa, caught a glimpse, but no more. "Who was that?" she sharply called out. But her daughter and Mr. Kage, talking face to face as they stood together, had seen no one.

"It was the nurse, mamma; she has taken baby away."

"It was a lady's hat," said Mrs. Kage. "Now do look, Caroline! It may be one of those Canterbury women; though I *have* given my orders. Well?"—She broke off as Caroline opened the door and shut it again.

"There's not a soul, mamma."

Mrs. Kage supposed she must have been mistaken. In point of fact, Caroline had not given herself time to reconnoitre, or she would have seen the butler ushering Miss Canterbury into her father's study. Mrs. Kage suddenly became awake to

her own claims, and imperatively summoned Thomas Kage to approach her ottoman.

"What brought you into the country, Thomas?" she asked, in an affected voice.

"The rail, madam."

"Farceur! I meant what did you come for?"

"The old business on which I came down occasionally some time ago. In fact, to see Mr. Rashburn."

"Dear me! Rashburn? Who may he be?"

"An iron-master at Aberton."

Mrs. Kage suddenly emptied an essence-bottle. Iron-masters could not be expected to come between the wind and her nobility. "And to think that you would not go to India to be a nabob, Thomas! Such a delightful offer, that of being made into a nabob. How could you refuse it?"

Caroline Canterbury, standing by, turned and glanced at him—perhaps not intentionally; let us give her the credit for that. He did not look back at her; and there rose up resentment in her vain woman's heart at the slight.

"India is not a healthy climate, Mrs. Kage," he said; "it is apt to entail liver-complaint. I was careful of myself, you see."

"It did not give your father liver-complaint," she returned rather tartly, as if the declining to go out had been a personal affront to herself.

"It killed him, for all that," answered Thomas, in a low tone.

"Dear me! I wish you wouldn't talk about such things as 'killing.' Pour me out some more elder-water, Thomas; there's the flacon. I'm sure when Sir Charles quitted London——"

A rather startling interruption caused Mrs. Kage to break off what she had been about to say; that is, it startled *her*. To see Mr. Canterbury come into the room with his eldest daughter, the two in animated conversation, was a sort of shock; for it convinced Mrs. Kage that it was Miss Canterbury who had passed down the hall towards the library to hold communication with her father; and all such communication Mrs. Kage was most anxious to prevent just now.

Even so. Miss Canterbury—her sense of right, her best feelings, her good and noble mind sadly outraged by the news that had reached her touching the premeditated disinheritance—had come to remonstrate, and went straight into the library to her father's presence, in spite of the new footman's attempt to stop her.

But Miss Canterbury gained nothing by it. Whether Mr. Canterbury suspected her errand—though he was, of all men, the least suspicious—or whether he had been warned by Mrs. Kage not to expose himself to remonstrance, or had promised that much to his wife, yielding wholly to her sway, powerful over him then, certain it was that the master of the Rock rose up in a sort of hasty fright, and all but stopped his ears in his daughter's face. Finding that did not stop what she was about to say, he suddenly left the library and took refuge in the drawing-room.

Olive followed him: she had come to speak, and she would do it. It was perhaps only natural that, seeing Mr. Kage there, Olive should hastily conclude he, young Mrs. Canterbury's only male relative, was a party to the plot. Since that dinner, on a certain Easter Monday, he had never been at the Rock. Olive, in her somewhat hasty judgment, felt no doubt that he had been summoned from London to the conference to strengthen his relatives' cause against that of Mr. Canterbury's daughters. Finding any other stranger there, Olive might have forced herself to present silence; him she regarded not.

At first it was a babel of tongues—all speaking at once, and Mrs. Kage contributing the largest share, hoping to put Miss Canterbury down. Olive's tone was perfectly courteous, rather subdued, but resolute. Thomas Kage would have retired, but Olive's enemies would not let him; they hoped his presence might deter her from saying much.

"Was it not enough to drive us from our home?" were nearly the first distinct words heard from Olive, more in plaint than anger; and her manner to her father was strictly respectful. "How distressing that was to us, papa, you never knew; but that was as nothing to the present contemplated injustice. Sir, the whole country will ring with indignation if it be carried out."

"What injustice?" responded Mr. Canterbury, in a timid tone, helplessly looking by turns at his wife and her mother, as if he needed protection.

She, Caroline, went up to him and put her arm within his. They were near an inlaid table bearing its glasses of choicest flowers; Mrs. Kage had not left her sofa; Olive was between them. The young barrister, finding his exit from the room stopped, turned to the window and stood there looking out, his back towards them.

"The injustice of disinheriting us, your unoffending and always dutiful daughters—we have ever been so, sir; you know we have—and of bequeathing your money to strangers," said Olive in reply.

Mrs. Kage let fall a bottle of something which filled the room with odour and stained the ottoman. "My dear Miss Canterbury, this is really shocking. You call your papa's beloved son a stranger!"

"Yes, Olive, he is my son," repeated Mr. Canterbury, as if it were something to catch at.

"I have not forgotten it, sir. And, as your son, he ought to receive a large proportion of your fortune. Mrs. Canterbury ought also to receive a suitable portion; she is your wife. Think not we would wish to be unjust, sir, or to deprive others of what they ought to receive. You might provide amply for them—what, perhaps, even themselves would think ample—but you should also provide for us. Mrs. Canterbury, speak: am I urging anything that is not perfectly fair and just?"

"Now, Olive, don't bring me in," said the young wife in pretty affectation. "I told Mr. Canterbury these things were to be settled without me; that I should say nothing, one way or the other. If he likes to leave his money to me and the ducky, of course he can; on the other hand, if he leaves it to your part of the family, I don't prevent him. I am neuter."

"In taking your word, Mrs. Canterbury," replied Olive, and she was unable quite to repress all signs of sarcasm, "I can only remark that, were I you, I would not be neuter. You might respect your husband's good name, and urge him to remember it. Papa, it is the thought of you, no less than our own claims, the hope that no shadow may rest upon

your memory in future years, that has brought me up this day."

"It was a most extraordinary procedure for you to come at all, my dearest Miss Canterbury, whatever may have been your motive," drawled Mrs. Kage.

"Friends in plenty would have come for me, madam; but, in my opinion, this subject should, as far as possible, be confined to the family; hence the motive of my procedure," retorted Olive. "Papa, will you do me and my sisters justice? Will you leave us a fair share of your great wealth? We were brought up to expect it."

No man living—I think this has been said before—could bear reproach or interference less well than George Canterbury. He stood now something like the ass between the bundles of hay, looking at his daughter and Mrs. Kage by turns. Olive's strong impression as she watched him was, that a portion of his mental vigour had departed.

"I—I—you said what I had left my daughters was a fair share, Mrs. Kage," uttered the unhappy gentleman, appealing to the ottoman.

A delicate pink tinged the lady's faded nose. She buried it in some pungent smelling-salts. "Oh, if you are good enough to ask *my* sentiments, dear Mr. Canterbury, I can only express them. I do think it a very nice sum indeed for single young ladies."

Olive turned towards her. "It is five thousand pounds."

"For each of you, dear Miss Canterbury."

"And you, madam, receive ten thousand in the same will."

Mrs. Kage gracefully opened her fan.

"Really these are Mr. Canterbury's affairs, not mine. I am surprised at you, Miss Canterbury."

"Father," pleaded Olive with emotion, taking a step towards him, "you have very ample wealth. It is more than sufficient to provide munificently for whomsoever you will. Think of the injustice, should we, your children, be excluded from it."

"The baby is his own child," resentfully interrupted Mrs. Kage. "Thomas, dear, do pray get me another cushion for my back. And set light to a pastile, will you? I am overpowered."

"That son may die," said Olive, looking at her father and Mrs. Canterbury.

No one spoke.

"Thomas, then! don't you hear?" said Mrs. Kage fractiously. "I want a pastile lighted."

Mr. Kage reluctantly turned from the window. Olive continued to follow out her argument. "Should the child die, the whole property—if what I hear be true—is to lapse to Mrs. Canterbury. It is to be hers unconditionally, at her sole and entire disposal. The whole property," emphatically repeated Olive, "save this wretched five thousand pounds to us, and the ten thousand bequeathed to Mrs. Kage."

"Oh, but you know he is not going to die," broke in Mrs. Canterbury, in the same pretty little voice of affectation that she used throughout the scene.

And Thomas Kage, who held a pastile in one hand and a light in the other, forgot both, and stood gazing at her as if transfixed by what he heard.

"You do not only destroy our prospects, sir, but our happiness," proceeded Olive. "I speak more particularly of Jane. Her marriage would have taken place before Christmas, and now Lord Rufort has ordered his son to break off the match. Papa,"—and Olive's eyes filled, which only made her raise her head more proudly—"it is a great humiliation to bring upon your daughters."

Mr. Canterbury fidgeted on his legs; but his wife held his arm tight: he could not fidget that.

"You have not done it of your own free will," pursued Olive. "And, that you have not, is well known to all; for you have been ever kind to us. You would be so still were you left uninfluenced. Will you be so, papa? will you only be just?"

The uncomfortable state of indecision displayed by Mr. Canterbury's countenance was almost curious to look upon. Thomas Kage remarked it with surprise.

"For goodness' sake let this end," murmured the indulged wife in her husband's ear. "Get rid of her."

And Mr. Canterbury, thus prompted, took a spurt of courage. "I will take these family matters into consideration, and you

shall then hear from me," he said, addressing his daughter. "You had better now retire, Olive."

Without any resistance, only with a slight bow to Mr. Kage, Olive swept to the door; but ere she had well gained it, she turned to speak, addressing particularly Mrs. Kage and Mrs. Canterbury.

"Pardon me that I say a last word. If the result of my father's consideration be unfavourable to us, if the birthright of his children is thus to pass from them to you, I can only assert, from my true heart, that we shall be happier in our poverty than you will be in the wealth so gained. It is far better to be the spoiled than the spoilers."

Another moment and Olive was gone.

Mr. Canterbury, feeling rather small no doubt in many respects, intimating that he had some matter of business on hand, and would return in a few minutes, slipped away to his library; and Mrs. Kage, with her collection of nerve auxiliaries, stepped daintily from the room to enjoy the composing quiet of her own chamber.

Which left Mrs. Canterbury and Thomas Kage alone.

CHAPTER XIV.

A SOLEMN WARNING.

THERE was a long pause. Thomas Kage, strangely silent, stood looking from the window again, his back to the room. She, Mrs. Canterbury, stole up to see what he might be gazing at; surely at something particular, with that intent stare! But no. The beautiful slopes with the autumn flowers lay beneath; the park beyond, with its fine trees and its herds of deer; the charming scenery went stretching around in the distance. But this was no unusual sight; and of men and women there were none.

"What are you looking at, Thomas?" The question aroused him. His eyes and his thoughts came back to present things with a start.

"Looking at? Oh, nothing. Nothing in particular."

"I wish you'd open the window. This disturbance has made me quite hot."

He flung up the wide sash. And some one walking along the broad path, that ran along the front of the house—some one who had just come into view from the house—turned upon them a steady gaze as they stood there side by side. It was Olive Canterbury.

"Where can she have been lingering?" exclaimed Mrs. Canterbury; and the words must undoubtedly have reached Olive, for the resentful, haughty tone was by no means subdued. "Surreptitiously cross-questioning Neel, perhaps, as to our sayings and doings."

Any one less likely than Olive Canterbury to cross-question "surreptitiously" could not well have been found. Thomas Kage made no reply whatever; he seemed to have relapsed into thought again. The sweet perfume of the flowers came wafting in; and Miss Canterbury, with her stately sweeping walk, passed on to the small side-park entrance, and so out of sight.

"Did you ever witness such a scene, Thomas? Quite vulgar, as mamma expressed it." Thomas Kage, lost in a reverie, made no reply, although he must have heard her. "This has given you a specimen of what those Canterbury women can be. That is mamma's name for them—'Canterbury women.' After this, I should think they would be forbidden the house."

But still Thomas Kage did not answer. His hand, with the deep mourning-ring worn on it in memory of his mother, was lifted to push back his dark hair from his right temple; his dark eyes, fixed again unconsciously on the distant landscape, wore a dreamy expression. Mrs. Canterbury feeling herself neglected, went to the hearth and began knocking the fire about with strange petulance.

"Caroline!" The accent was so sharply imperative that she dropped the poker and turned to him. "Did I understand clearly—that Mr. Canterbury's immense fortune goes unconditionally to you?"

"No; not if you understand that. The greater portion goes to the child. I have my settlement and——"

"I was alluding to the contingency of the child's death," he quickly interrupted. "In that case it becomes yours?"

"In that case, yes."

"Caroline, take the advice of a friend—you know I am one. Do not allow the property to be so willed."

"But why?" she rejoined, resuming her place by his side. "If my baby should die, what more natural than that his money should revert to me? Not that he is going to die, or likely to die. He is a hearty little fellow."

"Let it not revert to you," repeated Mr. Kage. "Caroline, I am advising you as I would my own sister; as one for whose true welfare I have as much interest as it is possible for man to have. I say it to you emphatically: do not suffer things to be so arranged that this great wealth shall revert to you on the contingency of the child's death."

"Do you mean that none of it ought to revert to me?"

"Either none, or only a small portion. You will have a very large and ample income without it."

"I wish you would tell me why you say this. It sounds very unreasonable."

"For one thing, you may marry again—most probably would do so. And your second husband——"

"What ever are you talking about?" exclaimed Mrs. Canterbury, breaking the pause he had come to abruptly. "You speak mysteriously, and are looking mysteriously, just as though your visions were far away, in the future or in the past."

Very true. His eyes wore their far-off dreamy gaze, his voice its most dreamy tone.

"I once saw a good deal of"—he hesitated for a moment—"of ill, arising out of a will of this kind. The property was not a tithe of what your child's will be. It was only a few hundreds a-year—some three or four—but the manner in which it was left was productive of much after distress."

"Are not such wills made every day?"

"They are. And I do not know why this one peculiar case should have thrust itself so forcibly on my remembrance. Nevertheless, take my advice—it is not possible that I can urge anything on you more emphatically than I would this. Do not let any great sum accrue to you in the event of your boy's

death. Your second husband"—his tone changed here to one of lightness—"might get to wish him out of the way."

"Don't you think you are rather premature in speaking of my second husband?" asked Mrs. Canterbury in sarcasm.

"Pardon me, Caroline, no; not in this case. We lawyers have to look forward to all kinds of possibilities," he continued, with a smile. "Just as doctors probe wounds, we must probe feelings. I have not quite done with yours yet."

"Well? Go on."

"When Miss Canterbury was speaking here just now, it seemed to me that I must be listening to a fable. Is it true that any such measure can be in contemplation as the disinheriting of Mr. Canterbury's daughters?"

"They are to have five thousand pounds each, including Mrs. Dunn. And they came into five thousand each on the death of their mother. What are you staring at, Thomas?"

He was looking at her fixedly, wonderingly, almost reproachfully. The gaze said volumes, and the soft bloom on Mrs. Canterbury's cheeks grew a shade brighter; her violet-blue eyes seemed to take a darker tinge. "Were such injustice to be committed, Caroline, the very stones of which the Rock is built might be expected to cry out. If Mr. Canterbury could make so shameful a will, I should say—pardon me—that he must be fit only for a lunatic asylum."

"You always had a very downright way of putting things before people, Thomas."

"Yes. My dear mother taught me to be earnestly sincere; even, when needs must be, at the expense of politeness. Oh, Caroline, indeed I have your true interest at heart. Be persuaded by me; be persuaded by the dictates of your own conscience; and tell Mr. Canterbury that this strangely-conceived and most ill-judged thing must not be carried out. Show him that his daughters' claims must be respected."

"I have not advised him either way," she peevishly said. "You heard me tell Olive so. I remain neuter."

"And what was Miss Canterbury's answer to you?—that you ought not to be neuter. The pretence of saying you are, is the merest sophistry, Caroline."

"Thank you, sir. I hope you have learnt to be rude enough

since we last met. I do *not* interfere in these affairs. Mamma gets talking to my husband about things. I don't."

"Very well. Then change your policy, and talk to him yourself. Tell him it is your wish that his daughters should be suitably provided for. Your mamma! Nonsense! Mrs. Kage's influence over Mr. Canterbury would fade to nothing beside yours; and I am sure you must know that. Why, Caroline, have you never reflected on what the effect would be, were Mr. Canterbury to disinherit his daughters in the manner proposed? You could never hold up your head again in this neighbourhood. Good men and women would despise you."

She made no reply. The mockery of her face had disappeared, to be replaced by a look of serious thought. Something or other in what he said had at length made an impression upon her. Mr. Kage moved from the window.

"You are not going, Thomas? You said you would stay to luncheon."

"I must just call on the Miss Canterburys," he answered. "There is plenty of time for it before luncheon. Where do they live now?"

"Thornhedge Villa. You can't miss it. A white house that you catch glimpses of on the right through the trees, as you go down the road."

"Good morning for the present, then, Caroline."

He passed through the beautiful hall, crossed the terrace, and so on to the park. Caroline watched him, her heart softly beating, the flush on her fair face taking a brighter hue. Thornhedge Villa was not far off: he might make his call and be back in half-an-hour; but even that half-hour she grudged sorely. The appearance of Thomas Kage had shown her one thing plainly; shown it her in spite of her previous make-believe to ignore the fact—that she loved him as deeply as ever. This short visit seemed as a sweet oasis amid a great desert stretching around her.

"We cannot help our feelings," thought Caroline by way of excuse for the disloyalty to her husband the admitted consciousness implied. "And what does it signify? So long as I bury it within me—and that will be always—no one is either the wiser or the worse. But, oh, has not he grown crotchety?

The notion of his advising me not to be named inheritor after my darling little Tom!"

When Mr. Kage reached Thornhedge Villa, Miss Canterbury had not returned. Jane had gone to the schools. Miss Millicent, the servant thought, was in the garden; most likely in the large arbour, he added: the young ladies sometimes took their work to it on a fine day. And Thomas Kage said he would go himself to seek her.

Millicent was seated with her profile turned to the sunlight; not working, but reading, her face a little bent over the book. Thomas Kage was almost close to her before she raised it; and he saw that she looked thinner and paler. Turning her head slowly to see who had approached, for one single moment she sat motionless, and then sprang up with a start, blushing a deep crimson, like a June rose. Ah me! And it told him no tale. No, not even when her hands trembled perceptibly, and her sweet eyes fell in a soft tremor, and the roses faded to a dead whiteness, and the face looked cold and faint as a lily. He put it all down to surprise, and was as innocent as one could be who had never loved. The emotion was a sealed book to Thomas Kage.

"Pardon me if I have surprised you too greatly, Miss Millicent Canterbury. Your servant said you were here, and I told him I would come to you."

"But how is it that you are at Chilling?" asked Millicent, scarcely knowing what she said in her mind's confusion. "It is so very long since the last time."

"Ay. Some fifteen or sixteen months. I have been once or twice to Aberton since, but did not find time to get as far as Chilling." They were walking now slowly towards the house through the shrubbery path. Millicent was beginning to recover her equanimity; at least, of manner. "Have you been quite well since I saw you, Miss Millicent?"

"Why?" she asked; for the question was put in anxious tones.

"Because you don't look as though you had."

"Oh yes, I have been well," she answered rather eagerly. "Quite, thank you. There's Jane."

Jane Canterbury was coming in at the gate; anxiety on her face, her step restless. In truth, she had only gone to the schools that morning because she could not rest indoors. So sure as Mr. Canterbury disinherited them, so sure did Jane believe that her marriage with Austin Rufort would never come to pass.

"Has Olive not returned?" she asked of Millicent, when she had greeted Mr. Kage, whom she was surprised to see.

No, Olive had not come home. And Jane Canterbury, of a remarkably open nature, spoke a word upon the trouble that had fallen on them, asking Mr. Kage if he had heard the report. He replied that he had been present, accidentally, at the interview that morning at the Rock; and in another minute they were all speaking confidentially together.

"The marriage itself was felt by us as a great blow," observed Jane. "Chiefly, I think, for papa's sake; it was so very unsuitable. When we saw people with smiles on their faces, and heard whispers reflecting on him and it, nothing could, to us, have been more painful."

"It came upon you as a surprise, I believe," remarked Mr. Kage.

"A surprise indeed. At first we never believed the report. In truth we had fancied that——" Jane suddenly stopped, and blushed as she looked at him.

"Fancied what?" he innocently rejoined.

"That she was engaged to you, Mr. Kage."

A gleam, as of a streak of crimson across a grey sky, flashed into the cheeks of Thomas Kage, leaving them afterwards white as ashes. Jane, walking side by side with him, saw it not. Millicent saw everything.

"No, she was not engaged to me," he said in quiet tones. "A poor man, as I am, cannot venture to hope for such good fortune."

"At any rate, she liked you; I am sure of it," said Jane. "Of course I never said a word to any one; but the signs to me were very plain. To you also, I fancy, Mr. Kage."

He did not answer, only looked straight forward with his white face. Millicent felt at war with the whole world, and, most of all, with herself. How could she, in her blindness,

have indulged that mistaken fable of the past, when others, not interested, had seen the truth?

"Well, those matters are done with, however it might have been, and she is my father's wife," continued Jane. "But that is no reason why we should be disinherited."

"Indeed it is not," he warmly answered.

He did not enter the house; time would not permit him, he said, but left a card for Miss Canterbury. However, whilst he was shaking hands, Olive came in. Very coldly indeed did she look upon Mr. Kage, saluting him with a distant bow.

"I have had the pleasure of seeing Mr. Kage before this morning," spoke she in haughty tones. "He made one of the party at the Rock."

"Amongst them, but not of them," returned Mr. Kage. "How I longed to take up your cause, Miss Canterbury, I cannot describe. But it was not my business; and, besides, I might only have done you harm."

"Then you are not an ally of the enemy?" said Olive. "You were not at the Rock to aid them in their schemes?"

"I!" His luminous eyes, with all their honest truth, shone full upon her. "Miss Canterbury, I possess, I believe, as innate a sense of justice as any man. I fully agreed with every word you spoke. And after your departure, when I was left alone with Mrs. Canterbury, I took upon myself to tender her some advice. Let us hope she will follow it."

Again Olive's heart went out to this young man as it had done once before in the days gone by. It seemed in that moment that she could have trusted him with her life. "Forgive me," she said, putting her hand into his in her frank but grave manner. "I ought never to have doubted you, Mr. Kage. It was seeing you at the Rock, and the manner in which they kept you in the room, that caused the idea to cross me."

"Never doubt me, Miss Canterbury," he said earnestly, as he clasped it. "I am not capable of wearing two faces."

"Surely they will not attempt to carry out this wholesale robbery!"

"I should say most certainly not. Their humiliation would be too great."

"It is Mrs. Kage," whispered Olive.

"Yes. As primary mover."

They had walked with him to the gate. He wished them farewell, and set off at a fleet pace up the road. Olive and Jane went back talking; Millicent lingered yet, and watched his receding steps. Thomas Kage had spoken of humiliation. What humiliation could be like unto hers, for having beguiled herself into love unsought, she mentally asked. For having fed and cherished the feeling through months and months, deceiving herself with the fond delusion that he cared for her, when all the while his whole heart and hopes had been given to another?

Even already some unpleasant fruits of the proposed scheme were coming home to its plotters; and during the short half-hour that intervened between Thomas Kage's exit and entrance, a slight disturbance had occurred at the Rock. The nurse to the little heir was a superior woman named Tring; very respectable, almost a lady. She had been a resident at Chilling for several years, and on the death of her husband, a land-surveyor in a small way, was forced to look out for some employment. She commenced a day-school and undertook to do plain and fancy work. The Miss Canterburys had been very kind and friendly to her, and helped her a good deal, purchasing some of her pretty little drawings. However, she made but a precarious living; and when the place of nurse to the new heir (as the child was styled) at the Rock was, so to say, going begging, Mrs. Tring applied for it, and was chosen out of several applicants.

"Oh, how could you!" exclaimed Leta, when she heard of it.

"Better do that, Miss Millicent, than starve; and I am not sure but it would have come to that with me," was Mrs. Tring's answer. "I love infants. I seem to yearn for them ever since I lost my only little one; and I can do my entire duty by the child. As to my pride, I had to put that in my pocket long ago."

Now it seemed that Mrs. Kage, in her perfectly inexplicable antagonism to Mr. Canterbury's daughters, would not regard the nurse with any great degree of favour, simply because they *did*. Although she had become a servant in their father's

household, the young ladies would not put aside their previous marks of respect, calling her "Mrs. Tring" to her face and showing her consideration. Mrs. Kage dashed open her scent-bottles when she heard them, and seemed as if she might faint.

Mrs. Canterbury, seeing Olive leave the Rock a little later than she might have done on the close of that morning's interview, had wondered, speaking with Thomas Kage, what had detained her. The fact was, that as Olive was crossing the hall to depart, she saw in a small parlour (the self-same room that the new footman had wished to invite her into on entering) Mrs. Tring and the baby. She went in and took the child in her arms, nursing it fondly. He was the innocent cause of a great deal of heartburning, this little child; but Olive's mind was too noble and just to resent it upon him, as some might have done.

"He is asleep, Mrs. Tring."

"Very nearly, ma'am. I was just about to take him up-stairs."

"I will take him myself," said Olive.

With soft steps lest she should awake the sleeping baby, Olive ascended the grand staircase, followed by Mrs. Tring. Over the beautiful day-cot of polished ebony, with its inlaid workings of silver (for young Mrs. Canterbury had provided things for her expected infant, not in accordance with the simplicity that is most suitable to infants, but with her husband's revenues), Olive pressed some more soft kisses on the sleeping face.

"You sweet little fellow!" she murmured. "It is not your fault that they would put this wrong upon us."

"Oh, ma'am," spoke the nurse, in the moment's impulse, "surely what we hear cannot be true! So great a wrong never can be inflicted on deserving ladies!"

Olive laid the child down and covered him over. Perhaps she was a little surprised to find that the rumour was so extensive. "How did you hear it, Mrs. Tring?" she inquired, quitting the cradle to face her.

"It was being talked of last night, ma'am, in the house-keeper's room. I went down there for something I wanted, and heard it. I have not slept all night, thinking of the cruel

injustice," added Mrs. Tring, her face—a very delicate one—flushing crimson.

Very contrary to Miss Canterbury's usual lofty, though in a sense courteous, reticence to her inferiors, she continued the subject instead of passing it by—continued it for a minute or two. But she said not a word that she would have objected to say before Mrs. Canterbury or any other member of the family; and she spoke openly, her tone of voice free as ordinary. Mrs. Tring was not quite so calm; all her indignation and sorrow had been aroused, and she warmly expressed both.

"The snake in the grass is Mrs. Kage," she observed, "though I'm sure I ought to beg her pardon for saying it. As long as she stays here, ma'am, you and the young ladies will never have fair play; Mr. and Mrs. Canterbury would be quite different without her. I have not been in the house a month yet, but I cannot shut my eyes to things that are going on in it."

Olive made no reply to this, except that she must be going, and turned to the staircase. Mrs. Tring attended her down, and opened the hall-door. Rather, perhaps, to the latter's surprise, upon re-entering the nursery, there stood Mrs. Kage. And Mrs. Kage's countenance was not pleasant to look upon. That amiable lady, ascending to her room close on the heels of Miss Canterbury, had put her ear to the nursery-door and heard the whole colloquy. It was not very much in all; not a tithe of what Olive had just said publicly in the drawing-room; but it served to show Mrs. Kage what the nurse's sentiments were. Tring verily thought she was going to be struck. Mrs. Kage was in the habit of being as contemptuous to her as might be, but she had never been violent. Her passion was something to shrink from. In fact, Tring's little compliments to herself—the expressed opinion given confidentially to Miss Canterbury as to the kind of mission the honourable lady fulfilled in the house—had set her all aflame. She could not get over the "snake in the grass."

A scene ensued. The nurse received a summary dismissal, and Caroline was called in to confirm it. Mrs. Kage outrageously exaggerated the fault to her daughter, and the words she had overheard; she affirmed, with angry passion, that

Tring was "in league with those Canterbury women to undermine the peace of the house, into which she had only come as their spy." Tring, not allowed to speak in her defence and the Miss Canterburys'—for Mrs. Kage condescended to push her with her own hands out of the room—was ordered to be away from the Rock within the space of an hour, or else she would be hunted from it. Mrs. Kage was not choice in her expressions that day.

"For pity's sake call my maid, Caroline, dear, and let her get me some red lavender," exclaimed the exhausted dame, sinking on the first chair she came to in her own room. But Caroline, who was not altogether unused to similar scenes on her mother's part, and thought little of them, neither called for the maid nor rang, but stood still with a blank countenance.

"It's all very well for you to dismiss Tring in this summary way, mamma, but what is to become of my baby? Who will nurse him?"

A pertinent question. Of all exacting things, a baby must be attended to; and, to say the truth, many a nurse knows this, and tyrannizes over households accordingly. Mrs. Kage, with wild eyes, an inflamed face, and a phial of red lavender in her hand, *vowed* (to put it politely) that "Tring the Jesuit" should not eat another meal nor sleep another night in the house; and Caroline felt helpless. In the emergency, when the state of the case became known, one of the household servants came forward, asking to be allowed to supply the deficiency—Judith, the second housemaid. She was a sensible, willing young woman; had lived at the Rock for several years, and been much liked by Olive and her sisters. But Mrs. Canterbury felt dubious as she listened to the request; a common housemaid (so she phrased it) could scarcely be fit for the post of nurse.

"You cannot know anything about the management of children, Judith."

"I beg your pardon, ma'am, but I know a great deal," was Judith's answer. "When I first went out to service, it was as nurse. I lived three years in the situation, and Miss Canterbury had a very good character with me. When your little baby was born, ma'am, I thought how much I should like to

become his nurse; but before I could pick up courage to speak, Mrs. Tring got the place."

"You can't write, you know, Judith," said Mrs. Canterbury, much perplexed.

"Well, no, ma'am. But I don't see that a nurse need know how to write."

Mrs. Canterbury, ransacking her brains, could not altogether see it either. Judith's ignorance in regard to what she called "book-learning" was a proverb in the family. It told against her. When she first came to the Rock she could not read; the Miss Canterburys, upon discovering this, had caused her to be taught. But, though an excellent and capable servant in regard to hand-labour, Judith Collett proved remarkably deficient in brainwork. Even now she could not *read* through a chapter in the Bible, but had to *spell* through it. As to writing, when something was said about her learning that, Judith flatly refused. Reading was bad enough, she said; writing might fairly puzzle her senses away.

I hope the reader will not deem these small details unnecessary or puerile. They have to be told. All with a purpose; as will be found later in the story.

"Well, I think I will try you, Judith," decided Mrs. Canterbury. "At any rate, while we look out for another." And thus Judith Collett, the second housemaid, was installed in the higher and far more important post of nurse at the Rock. Could Mrs. Kage have foreseen how strong a link that was destined to prove in a future and fatal chain, she had surely buried Tring's offence in silence, and never dismissed her.

Seated at the sumptuous luncheon-table a few minutes later, Mrs. Canterbury and her mother all smiles and sweetness, Thomas Kage had little conception of the storm that had just passed. The master of the Rock, upright in his accustomed place, had learnt nothing of it. Tring was his child's nurse still, for aught he knew to the contrary. The meal was soon over. Thomas Kage had to go back to Aberton, and could not linger. Mr. Canterbury offered to drive him, and went round to the stables, rather undecided what horses to take; one of the pair that he himself usually drove being lame.

"When do you go back to London?" asked Mrs. Canterbury

as they stood round the fire, Mrs. Kage having put herself into an armchair.

"By to-night's train."

"And when shall you come down again?"

"Not at all, I fancy. There will be no necessity for it."

"I meant to see us. I was not thinking of Aberton. Mr. Canterbury has just told you you must come for Christmas. Will you, Thomas?"

"Thank you; he is very kind. I fear I shall not be able to come."

And, by the cold and guarded tone, Mrs. Canterbury felt certain that he never meant to come again—oh, perhaps for ages. But she would not urge it. For one thing, she was sure it would be all the same if she did. "I forgot to ask you, Thomas, if you found the Miss Canterburys at home?"

"I found Millicent at home. The others came in afterwards. Millicent Canterbury has altered," he suddenly added.

"Altered?"

"Yes. I am sure I do not fancy it. She looks—I could almost say careworn. As though she had gone through some sorrow."

Caroline Canterbury dropped her eyes. *She* knew what the sorrow was too well, and that it was herself who had led to it.

Mrs. Kage looked up from her chair. "I wonder, dear Thomas, that you could care to call on those people! One might have thought the display made by Olive here was enough for you."

Thomas Kage took a step forwards to face her.

"With every word that Miss Canterbury uttered here, I agreed, and more than agreed," he said in firm clear tones. "As you have spoken on this subject to me, Mrs. Kage, I will speak. I have no right to do so; I am aware of that; but I do it for your sake. Let me pray of you not to suffer this injustice to be committed——"

"It is Mr. Canterbury's business, not mine," interrupted Mrs. Kage, in a voice so unpleasant as to be almost a scream.

Thomas Kage slightly drew in his lips. The gesture said that he ignored Mr. Canterbury altogether in the matter, as plainly as gesture could. "Remember that the money is theirs

by right of birth," he impressively continued. "They were born to it. You and Caroline are—forgive me if I speak the word—in a sense interlopers. Let it be at least equally shared with them."

With her fan and her essence-bottles in her hand, and a white lama shawl that was on her shoulders trailing after her, Mrs. Kage went mincing from the room. "Such a headache!" she said, plaintively. "Dear me!"

Caroline had drawn to the window, ignoring the conversation just as Thomas Kage ignored Mr. Canterbury. He went up to her. "I must say good-bye, Caroline; the carriage is coming round, I see. Fare you well." She turned to face him, abandoning her hands to his. He paused a moment ere he spoke. "Will you take my advice? Nothing in this world could I urge so solemnly upon you. Let not this grievous wrong be inflicted on Mr. Canterbury's daughters. They have an equal claim with you—some might say a greater claim."

"It is not my affair," she answered. "You heard me say I was neuter."

"And, above all, do not be the inheritor contingent on the boy's death. The thought is troubling me like a haunting shadow."

"Why should it trouble you?"

"I do not know. It is as bad as a nightmare. Let the Miss Canterburys inherit it; any one rather than you. Take your portion of it if you like; a fifth share with them."

"And if I were not to take your advice?"

"Take it; take it on both questions," was all he urged in answer. "I think, if you suffered this crying injustice to be committed, that I could never esteem you again. As my cousin, you are dear to me still." She tossed back her pretty curls, still worn in the free flowing manner of her girlhood; tossed them partly in petulance, partly in vanity. "Caroline, mark me. It will never bring you good."

"Don't I tell you, Thomas, the affair is not mine? It lies with Mr. Canterbury." She seemed hard indeed to be convinced. He fixed his keen luminous eyes on her, and spoke in an impressive whisper:

"'Remove not the old landmark, and enter not into the

field of the fatherless. For their redeemer is mighty; he shall plead their cause with thee.'"

"Why—what in the world—have you turned parson?" irreverently exclaimed Caroline in her extreme astonishment. "Have you the Bible by heart?"

"A verse or two of it that my mother taught me," he answered, his tone changing to a careless one. "Fare you well, Caroline."

CHAPTER XV.

DISINHERITED.

Whether Mrs. Canterbury followed the advice of Thomas Kage, and whispered to her husband a permission to remember his daughter's claims, cannot here be told, since no one knew whether she did or did not. One fact was indisputable—that he never would have thought of disinheriting them in the first instance but for its being put into his head. No, nor persisted in it without perpetual promptings. However it might have been within the precincts of the Rock, out of it an impression went abroad that the unjust will remained in force and the Miss Canterburys were disinherited. As the noise (I should like here to use the French word bruit; we have none so appropriate) of this ran round Chilling and its environs, every one cried out "Shame!"

The first real fruits of the calamity fell on Jane. Lord Rufort, finding his son was not likely to allow the change to affect his engagement, went forth to an interview with Austin at the Rectory, and peremptorily ordered him to bring it to an end. He was met by a refusal; low, courteous, and deprecatory, but still a refusal. It astonished the old peer to such a degree that for a few moments he was speechless. His sons were getting to be middle-aged now; the eldest was approaching forty, Austin considerably past thirty; but they had always continued to yield him perfect submission.

"You won't give Miss Jane Canterbury up!" exclaimed the old lord, sitting bolt upright in his usual stately fashion in the

stiffest chair in the study, his riding-whip lying across his angular knees, that were cased in black silk-velvet breeches.

"I cannot do it, sir," replied Austin, who stood at a respectful distance, tall and upright too, with nobility marked on every line of his open and genial face. "If you go so far as to forbid the marriage, all we can do is to wait. Neither she nor I would directly fly in the face of the edict."

"Wait for what?" demanded Lord Rufort, his mass of iron-grey hair looking slightly ruffled, and himself too.

"For a more propitious time: when the embargo should be removed."

"What! you would marry her in spite of the loss of fortune?"

"Father, we are not children that we can kiss and part. If I were to break with Jane Canterbury, I should never find another woman to care for as I care for her; no, not though I spent my life seeking one the world through. I fancy, if Jane could be induced to express her true sentiments, she would on her side avow the same. We shall come together some day, I hope, with time and patience. If not, I do not suppose either of us will ever marry."

Lord Rufort stared a little, as if unable to comprehend matters clearly. Only in height and form were he and his son alike; the peer's face was narrow, a secretive one; Austin's was open, candid, and good.

"And pray, under this calamity, what would *you* do, if left to your own devices?" asked Lord Rufort.

"I should not let it make the slightest difference. We were to have been married before Christmas, and should be still."

"What would you live upon? Bread-and-cheese?"

"If we could get nothing better, we should be willing to eat that. It would not come quite to it, sir. This house is good, the garden productive; and both are mine, free of charge. My income from the living, as you know, is about three hundred a-year; and Jane is not quite disinherited. She has five thousand pounds now, out at good interest; and will have five thousand more, at present showing, after Mr. Canterbury's death."

"It would be starvation," growled Lord Rufort. "Call it five or six hundred a-year, all told. Remember that you are a

peer's son. Would it be consistent that you, the Honourable and Reverend Austin Rufort, should set up housekeeping upon so miserable a pittance?"

A half-smile showed itself for a moment on Austin's lips. "I cannot help having been born what I am, sir. I have been calculating expenses versus income all day, and find we shall have enough for quiet comfort, if Jane can only think so. It is she who is most to be considered, father—reared in so much luxury."

"But for the large revenues expected to be inherited by George Canterbury's daughters, I should never have given my consent to your proposing to one of them," was the haughty answer.

"That she has lost the prospect, sir, is no fault of hers or of mine," said Austin. "Perhaps we shall be as happy without wealth as with it."

"You will not risk it, Austin—never, with my consent. If George Canterbury chooses to lose his senses, that's no reason why I should lose mine. I cannot help you with money—your eldest brother is too extravagant for that; he drains me of all I have. In giving you your clerical profession and your good name, I gave you all I had to give. There may be a trifle for you after my death; there can be no help before it."

"I should not think of asking it, father," said the Rector, who was feeling this to be a most uncomfortable interview. "But do you not think that the fact of my possessing no money should be a just cause for your overlooking the deficiency of it in my future wife?"

"No, I don't," said the old lord bluntly. "You will make her the Honourable Mrs. Rufort, next remove to a peeress; and this is an advantage that ought to be met in money, if it can't be in kind. Let Canterbury settle an income of a thousand a-year upon Miss Jane, and I'll withdraw my opposition."

"She and I—I have just said we are not children—might be allowed to judge of the amount of income we could make sufficient to be contented upon."

"Contented in theory," retorted Lord Rufort, with a grim

frown; "it wouldn't be in practice. You are talking like a child now."

Austin Rufort pushed his bright dark hair from his brow, the movement betokening vexation. To induce his father to see things in the proper light, he felt was becoming more and more hopeless.

"You would be sending to Rufort Hall every month of your life to beg help of me, Austin. I will not risk that; neither will I suffer you to rush into poverty. I am sorry to have to interpose my veto against your marriage with Miss Jane Canterbury, but the circumstances compel me to do it. Good day; you need not come out."

Lord Rufort went stalking away, his head in the air; Austin, spite of the injunction, dutifully attending him. His horse and mounted groom waited at the gate, and they rode away.

Whether Lord Rufort felt a doubt of Austin's implicit obedience, cannot be said; but he deemed it well to follow up his mandate by an active measure. The Rector of Chilling found himself called suddenly upon to attend his father on a continental excursion of some weeks' duration—a substitute and the bishop's leave of absence being already provided without any effort of his. Before Jane Canterbury had well heard the news that the parish was about to be handed over to the care of a stranger, Austin came to Thornhedge to wish her good-bye. Jane, quiet and calm though her exterior was, felt it all bitterly. It seemed like the knell of past hopes.

"Is it to be for ever, Austin?" she asked in low tones, as Mr. Rufort took her hand in farewell, when the brief interview of five minutes was over—all his time could allow to it.

Not immediately did he answer. He held her hand in his, and looked steadily into her blue eyes, sad now, with a questioning gaze. "I thought we had mutually agreed on our line of conduct, Jane?"

"Yes; but you are not free to act as you will."

"Indeed, I am—quite sufficiently so to keep my word, and *wait*. I have told Lord Rufort that in anticipation of the blow, we had made up our minds to look forward in hopeful patience. Do not fear me, Jane. Be it for ten weeks or ten

years that the waiting has to last, we shall come together, Heaven sparing us."

"And—do we separate until then?" she rejoined, the tears raining from her eyes.

"Most certainly not. Our intercourse will be the same—you permitting it—that it has been. My father cannot control that, though he may put his veto on the one serious act of a son's life—marriage. And now, Jane, time is up. God bless you!"

A minute longer yet, and then the parting was over. Gossips said it was to be a final separation. Mrs. Kage, gently fanning herself, observed to a friend in confidence that, for her part, she never had believed in the serious attentions of the Honourable Mr. Rufort to Jane Canterbury.

Meanwhile the will remained in the possession of Mr. Norris *un*executed; for that slow solicitor, what with this excuse and that excuse, contrived to delay it. But one day Mr. Canterbury's large barouche drove into Aberton, and drew up before the lawyer's office. The carriage was well filled; Mrs. Canterbury and her mother sat in it side by side, all feathers and finery; Mr. Canterbury opposite to them, and the young heir on the lap of the new nurse, Judith.

And it may be observed, en parenthèse, that Judith was proving herself so apt at her new duties, and gave so much satisfaction in them, as to stand a fair chance of remaining in them permanently.

The footman came round to open the carriage-door for his master; who alighted and went in. Country offices are not always on a magnificent scale. Mr. Norris's consisted of one room, and what might be called a large closet. The closet was for Mr. Norris's two clerks; the room for himself and his clients. Just now the lawyer was at home alone, so he and Mr. Canterbury had the office to themselves. George Canterbury looked more of a beau than usual. He had been getting younger and younger ever since his marrriage; that is, certain adjuncts of his had. His teeth were newer and whiter: his auburn hair had a fuller and more graceful flow; his clothes would have become a young fellow just out of his teens. Whether the sexagenarian, George Canterbury, looked the

older or the younger for all this, was a matter of opinion: some hold to the notion that the more craftily an ancient man or woman endeavours to hide the ravages of time by false adornments, the older they look. I think it is so. Art cannot really contend with Nature.

"Is my will ready for signature, Mr. Norris?"

"Not quite, sir," was the lawyer's reply, who had given up to Mr. Canterbury the post of honour in the arm-chair, and had taken his own seat opposite.

"Not quite!" repeated Mr. Canterbury. "This is the fourth or fifth time I have come here asking the same question, and been met with the same answer."

"I have been very busy," said Mr. Norris.

"You must find me a better excuse than that. My business has not been accustomed to wait for other people's."

"The truth is, Mr. Canterbury, that I do not like the will," spoke the lawyer; "but I have said so until I am tired of saying it."

"Very well. I will not submit to another day's delay. As you object to act for me—and these excuses and procrastinations amount to it—I shall put it in the hands of Watkins." And Mr. Canterbury evidently meant what he said. The lawyer knitted his brow: Watkins was a rival solicitor in Aberton.

"The injustice of such a will, sir——"

"You have said quite enough on that score, Norris," interrupted the master of the Rock, drawing himself angrily up. "I did not come here to listen to more of it. This is Tuesday. If you choose to undertake that the will shall be ready for signature by this hour on Thursday, I still give you the option of drawing it up. If you will not, I go at once to Watkins."

That there would be no reprieve from the unjust will, Mr. Norris had long been sure of; and so—he embraced the alternative. As it must be done, as well he should do it as another. "Very well. You force me to this, Mr. Canterbury. I will draw up the will; but I do it under protest, and wash my hands of consequences. What are to be its provisions?"

"Exactly what the last were: except in the matter of executors."

"There must be a change in *them*," replied the lawyer, in a cynical kind of tone, that his client perceived and did not like. "Both Lord Rufort and Mr. Carlton have notified to me their refusal to act."

"I shall not be so courteous this time as to ask the question," said Mr. Canterbury; "and you will have the goodness, Mr. Norris, not to let the name of the executor transpire."

The lawyer caught at the word.

'Executor! Do you mean to have but one?"

"It will be enough," said George Canterbury.

Five minutes more of conversation, a reiteration of the former will's chief provisions, lest the lawyer should have forgotten them, and then the master of the Rock went out to his carriage. Mrs. Kage, glancing at him over her undulating fan, which she used equally indoors and out, a sharp keen glance, as he took his seat in front of her, made smiling way for him.

"Is it at length signed, dear Mr. Canterbury?" she sweetly asked.

"No; Norris has not got it ready. It will be signed on Thursday."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Kage, sharply. "That man never has anything ready. I don't like him."

In accordance with the positive directions that he could no longer evade, Mr. Norris drew out the will; and at the appointed time it was duly executed. How the report of the fact got about was not known; but that it became public property was indisputable. "Shame," again said the neighbourhood. "Shame, and double shame!"

So it was definitely settled; and the Miss Canterburys were, so to say, disinherited. The first brunt of the shock over, they set themselves to make the best of it; just as they had done in regard to their father's marriage. That he was no longer in possession of his full vigorous intellect (not that it had ever boasted great things), they fully believed. Olive thought Mrs. Kage could not be in hers, or she never would have shown herself so strangely grasping and covetous. Olive, large-minded, generous-hearted, had yet to learn what an unprincipled, greedy woman is capable of, and how fast she can drive when the reins are put into her hands. It was a dangerous

temptation; and Lord Gunse's rather battered daughter went into it wholesale, wanting strength to resist and moderation to temper.

Caroline Canterbury could have come to the rescue, and did not. But the wholesome advice of Thomas Kage, and the impressive words it was couched in, would not leave Caroline. It was in her mind always. One night she dreamt that she had *not* followed his advice, that the money all descended to her and her little son, and that some terrible ill supervened. She thought she saw the baby sitting on the carpet, staring up at an enormous mountain of yellow gold—sovereigns—towering before him. Suddenly her child's face changed to one of great and exceeding fear; and in the same moment the golden mountain began to change. Into what, she did not know; never, never afterwards could she remember; only that it was something dreadful to look upon. Caroline awoke with the amazing terror; and for half-an-hour she literally shook as she lay.

"I'll tell Mr. Canterbury to make a just will," she said to herself in the moment's agony.

Could we only keep our good resolutions, how very different things might be in this world! Had Caroline Canterbury kept hers, and whispered the word to her husband that would set matters right, the words that the man was longing for—for, though a very reed in her hands and her mother's, there is no doubt his conscience pricked him always on the score of his once-loved and still-respected daughters—had she kept this resolution, the chief ill that this story has yet to tell of would never have taken place. Daylight chased away ghostly fancies, and Caroline's dream faded before reality, although it had perhaps come from her guardian angel.

Mr. Rufort got home in November. The first intimation people had of his return was seeing him in the reading-desk when they went to church on Sunday morning. The parish was not large, and he kept no curate. Jane Canterbury grew red and white with astonishment; she naturally asked herself how long he had been back. It was a busy day with the Rector. He had come home to find sickness in the district; and, beyond a hand-shake outside the church-door after both morning and afternoon service, Jane had no communication

with him. Late the following afternoon he came to call. Olive and Leta were out; only Jane was there. The dusk of the November twilight was already spreading its wings on the earth when Jane rose up to greet him. "I hear it is all definitely settled, Jane," he observed, after a few minutes given to general conversation; "that Mr. Canterbury has positively signed his unjust will?"

"Yes," she answered in low tones, feeling very uncomfortable. "I am ashamed to confess it for papa's sake."

"And for the sake of others also, I should say," added Mr. Rufort. "It is Mrs. Canterbury's work; there cannot be a doubt of that; and very especially her mother's."

"Oh, of course. We have been laying out our plans in accordance with our changed prospect, and are already beginning to act upon them," added Jane. "Papa intends to continue our present allowance during his life; there is to be no alteration in that, and we shall save what we can out of it. One or two of our servants must be parted with; our carriage is already laid down; and, in short, we are about to live in the style that we shall be compelled to adopt in after-years."

"You say 'we,'" remarked Mr. Rufort.

"Yes. Olive and Leta and myself."

"But what is the Rectory to do, Jane?"

"Oh, Austin, do not play with me."

The question was almost too much for her. While trying to speak very calmly, her heart had been full to overflowing. She supposed he had put it in idle jest. Mr. Rufort crossed over to her, and she stood up.

"Will you have me at once, Jane, under the present state of things?" Could he be jesting still? Jane Canterbury turned and looked into the fire, her hands and heart alike trembling. "You know how small are the revenues of my living, Jane," resumed Mr. Rufort, standing close to her. "The merest bagatelle in comparison with those of the Rock; a trifle even compared with what you enjoy here. The consciousness of this lies upon me as I speak, and so I may not press the question, but only put it to you quietly and—I had almost said—coldly. Knowing what my income is, will you venture upon it, and come home to me?"

"What! in defiance of Lord Rufort? Oh, Austin!"

"No; were he defiant still, I should not ask you." A wild rush of happiness in her heart, a glow of rapture in her blue eyes, as she turned to him. He put his hand upon her shoulder, and his tone, losing the formality to which he had constrained it, became low and sweet.

"Lord Rufort has come to his senses, Jane. In the weeks I have been spending with him on the Continent, I believe he grew to see that you and I both meant waiting; that our patience might endure beyond his opposition. On Saturday, when I left him at the Hall, he said just a word, a tantalizing word, which might mean one thing as well as another. So this morning I went over after breakfast to put the question decisively to him: would he sanction our union? I had to wait three hours, for he had gone to Aberton."

Jane was waiting now; Mr. Rufort had paused.

"And he gave me his answer, Jane. He informed me that, if you and I are still so foolish as to wish to set up on bread-and-cheese, he will not oppose our doing it, as it is a matter chiefly affecting ourselves personally. One proviso he makes—that when the Rectory shall be filled with children, we do not go to him for help to keep them."

The tears were stealing down her glowing cheeks. "Is it true?" she softly whispered.

"Quite true, Jane. So far as my father's consent and approval are concerned, I may take you home to bread-and-cheese to-morrow. Upon the bread-and-cheese view of the affair, he has all along dwelt particularly. But the scruples are on my part now." She glanced quickly up. "Much as we had learned to care for each other, Jane, I should never have asked you to share my small income but for your possessing ample means of your own. I should have felt that I was not justified in doing it, reared, as you had been, in luxury."

"Would your scruples have been for me, or for yourself?"

"Jane!"

A bright smile stole over her face.

"We shall not be so very badly off, Austin. I have a little still, you know."

"You will not be afraid?"

"Afraid!"

Mr. Rufort took Jane in his arms as tenderly as he was wont to take the babies who were brought to him to be christened. The suspense and trouble were over. "We can keep to our old arrangement, Jane, my darling. And I shall have you at the Rectory before Christmas."

CHAPTER XVI.

SPRING ROUND AGAIN.

With every crevice in the large bedroom, through which air could enter, stopped; with a roaring fire in the grate; with crimson draperies of silk and wool at the windows, and a handsome screen at the back of the sofa, the chamber was up to nearly fever-heat. Thomas Kage felt it so, what with the real atmosphere and the trimming he was getting.

On the sofa, enveloped in an Indian shawl, an ornamental night-cap covering her white hair, sat Mrs. Garston. Her grey eyes, vigorous as they used to be, were glaring angrily on Thomas Kage. She was a healthy, strong old lady; but early in the month of January, that foe to old and young, bronchitis, attacked her, and she really had had a fight for life. Her sound constitution and excellent habits saved her. She was out of danger now, but remained a prisoner to her chamber until warmer weather should set in, for the spring was early yet.

Two years had now elapsed since the death of Lady Kage, and Thomas Kage had continued to reside in the house adjoining, according to his mother's evident wish. But he did not get on very fast; and expenses, quietly though he lived, absorbed every shilling of his earnings. In point of fact, the house, with its cost, was too much for him. He did not care to part with it altogether, so he resolved to let it furnished. A tenant was found sooner than he had anticipated; the agreement for taking it off his hands for twelve months was signed, and Thomas Kage had come in to disclose the news to Mrs. Garston.

She received it with bitter resentment. Had he been a boy, she would decidedly have shaken him. Leaning forward on her sofa, the Indian shawl on her shoulders, the screen of many colours behind her, a glass full of sweet spring flowers on the table near, she sat rapping her stick in passion, now on the hearthrug, now on the fender, and glaring at Thomas Kage in the opposite chair. But that he had backed just out of her reach, she might have rapped it on *him*.

"I can't be up in my room a week or two, but you must go and make a fool of yourself, and sign away your home!" she repeated for the tenth time, when his arguments and excuses had been nearly exhausted by reiteration. "Not able to keep it up! Don't talk nonsense to me, Thomas Kage. What am I good for, that you could not come to me for a hundred or two? I have it to spare, I suppose."

"You are very kind, very generous," he murmured. "But indeed, Mrs. Garston, I never thought of such a thing. I would rather get on myself than be helped, even by you."

"You'd rather be a pig-headed, ungrateful, senseless idiot," retorted Mrs. Garston. "Not ungrateful? Don't tell me! No one but an underhand man, Thomas Kage, would have taken advantage of my being laid by to act against me."

"Indeed, I did not take advantage of that. But that you were too ill to see me, I should have told you of my project from the first."

"And to go and sign the deed! One would think the world was coming to an end. I say the agreement shall be cancelled."

"It is impossible, Mrs. Garston. I am very sorry you are vexed."

"A pretty thing for *me* to be pestered with new neighbours at my time of life! I wish your dear mother could look down and see what you have done, Thomas Kage!"

"I did it all for the best," he answered. "Situated as I am, I ought not to have attempted to keep on the house longer than the twelvemonth enjoined by my mother. My rooms in the Temple will do very well for me, and I've had a bed put into them. As to the new neighbours, I thought of you, and was cautious there. Mr. and Mrs. Rashburn

are elderly people, very quiet; they have only four elderly servants, and no family."

Down came the stick. "Rashburn? Who's Rashburn? Those iron people at Aberton?"

"Distant relatives of theirs. It was through Mrs. Dunn I heard that they wanted a house."

"It would become Lydia Dunn better if she concerned herself more with her own affairs, instead of putting her finger into other people's," was the irascible interruption.

"And she heard of it through her brother-in-law, Richard Dunn. He——"

"Stop! Are they friends of Dickey's?"

"Yes. Mr. Rashburn is in a state of health that requires constant medical supervision; and he has come to town to be under the best. They have taken my house for twelve months."

Mrs. Garston growled. Nevertheless, if anything, under the circumstances, could mollify her desperate vexation, it was the fact that the new tenant in prospective was a friend of Richard Dunn's. For Richard—or, as she generally called him Dickey—was a favourite of hers.

"Who's going to keep Dorothy?" fiercely demanded Mrs. Garston. "She's ill, and not fit for service."

"Well, of course I shall, in part. She has saved a little. Dorothy's wants are so very few that she will not need much. I think she means to take a room in some rural place: if anything will restore her, it is quiet and country air."

"Do you know what you'd do, Thomas Kage? You'd give away your head if it were loose. You are as bad as your mother was. Lady Kage never thought of herself in all her life; it was other people, other people, other people, always with her; and it's the same with you."

"I think I'd rather live for others than myself."

"Of course you would, being devoid of brains."

A pause ensued. Thomas Kage wanted to get away, but hardly dared to make a move. The old lady was nodding her head, her face stern, her lips compressed.

"Well, I never thought you'd abandon me in my old age, Thomas, and when I've been right at death's door! From the

time when you were a child in petticoats and climbed on my knee, I've looked upon you as belonging to me almost as much as to your mother. If you wanted to part from me, why didn't you take that precious dance to India?"

"But I am not going to abandon you, or to part from you; I would not do anything of the kind," he returned, sincerity in his earnest eyes. "I will come up to see you two or three times a week."

"Two or three times a week!" resentfully repeated Mrs. Garston. "You used to come in every day before I was ill, sometimes morning and evening too."

True. She had been exacting, and he kind and considerate. Snappish and domineering though she was with him, he knew that she looked and longed for his presence as she did for no one else's, and that his visits were the one daily break in her monotonous life. The Temple was a great deal farther off than next door; but he began to ask himself the question—could he get up to her, as usual, daily? It almost seemed, her steel-grey eyes looking into his, that she divined his thoughts.

"You might come up to me every evening!"

"I will try. It may not be quite every evening. I don't suppose business will admit of that."

"Now you do as I bid you. If your mother's gone, I'm here, and I act as I please. I wonder what would become of your poor head but for me! Considering that you are a steady Christian man, Thomas Kage, I never met with one so likely to lose it. I don't mean you'd drift into folly," she explained, with a sharp knock on the leg of the sofa; "like Barby Dawkes and the bad young men of the present day. If you could do that, you might pay me a call in your fine tandem when the wind blew this way, but you'd never get pressed to come. Hold your tongue till I've finished! I'm old enough to be your grandmother. I dine at six; you know it; well and good. Every day in the week, from Monday till Saturday, your knife and fork will be laid in my dining-room, whether you use it or not. And on Sundays, *of course*, you'll spend the day here."

He got up, and took her hand, his eyes so earnest and grateful that they seemed to have tears in them. Not for the promised dinners, but the kindness. No man living could have

a heart more sensitive to that than Thomas Kage. Wishing her good day, he went out, and bent his steps towards Paradise Square, for he wanted to see Mrs. Dunn. His way to it lay through Paradise Terrace; and, as he was passing Mrs. Annesley's, an impulse prompted him to turn in. For, in truth, he could not remember how long it was since he had called there. Not often in the day-time, Sundays excepted, was Mr. Kage away from his chambers in the Temple.

The servant ushered him into the drawing-room quietly. Every movement of the household was regulated by the example of its cold and quiet mistress. Thomas Kage surprised Miss Belle in a solitary waltz. The pretty young girl, a very fairy, in a white-lace evening dress and a profusion of blue ribbons, was whirling round the room to a gay tune from her own lips. He rather marvelled at the attire.

"Good gracious! I thought it was mamma, and wondered what brought her home so soon," exclaimed the young lady, ceasing her dance abruptly to welcome Thomas Kage. And all in a breath, seeing him looking at her gala robes, she began volubly to explain. A party was to take place that evening at the fashionable seminary, Miss Gammerton's, where the young lady had been educated, and she was invited to it.

"There was a break-up of the girls before Christmas, through the fever, and so to-night is to be prize-giving night. It will be a grand affair; not one of the stupid sets-out they have generally in the half-year, when gentlemen are not admitted. I don't care to go to them," added Miss Belle, with candour.

"You have dressed early, young lady," remarked Mr. Kage.

She burst into a merry laugh. "For one thing, we go early —five o'clock. The prizes and the tea will take up the time till seven, the concert till nine; and if we began dancing later than that, Miss Gammerton would go into a fit, thinking the girls could do no lessons afterwards for a week to come. But it's not that."

"Not what?" asked Thomas Kage, looking at the flitting movements of the pretty child, who kept waltzing from side to side while she talked.

"My having dressed so soon. I heard mamma tell Sarah this morning that she should send me in my drab silk, which

was warm; and Sarah answered, 'Yes, that would be best, as the weather was still bleak.' Sarah's nothing but a regular old maid, you know; Mr. Kage. Will I go in my drab! I thought. So as soon as their backs were turned, I went up and put this on. They've gone out to pay visits, because the day's fine. I told mamma if she made me go with her, I should be tired to death when night came; and she left me at home. Tra, la, la, la!"

"Your mamma may insist on the drab when she returns," said Thomas Kage, interrupting the gay-hearted singing, his own eyes bright with amusement.

"Oh, will she, though! I am to go round in the brougham that brings them home, and I shall have my opera-cloak on by that time, and my fan and bouquet in my hand, and be ready. She will groan at first, and scold and grumble; but she never *makes* me do a thing I hold out about; she can't, you know, for I have a will of my own. Whom *do* you think Miss Gammerton has invited this time?"

"I'm sure I can't tell. Not me."

"Dickey Dunn," continued the girl, her whole face alive with mischief and merriment. "Dickey knows her a little, and must have said he would like to go. Won't we girls make sport of him!"

"Of Mr. Dunn?"

She nodded. "Old Dickey is my lover, you know. That is, he would like to be. Fancy an old man of eighty making up to me!".

Child though she was in mind and manners, if not quite so in years, there was something in the light mockery that jarred on the true heart of Thomas Kage. Few men could bear to hear sacred feelings ridiculed less than he. "Mr. Dunn is not yet forty, Belle," he said in grave tones. "I know nothing of what you say; it may or may not be; but I don't think you ought to speak of him in this way to any one."

"I hope he'll ask me to waltz; I hope he will! I'll make him whirl round and round till his breath goes. Good gracious, Mr. Kage, why do you look so grave? You are as bad as Sarah."

He did not stay—in fact, had not the time to stay; but

departed, leaving cards for Mrs. and Miss Annesley. It may be as well to mention here that the visit of Sarah Annesley had resulted in a permanent residence. Mrs. Annesley had formally proposed it to her; nay, had besought her to remain; offering her a happy home, free of every cost, in return for the valuable companionship Sarah supplied to her flighty daughter. And Sarah Annesley had seen well to accept it, and strove to do her duty. Which was rather difficult.

At Mrs. Dunn's door, Thomas Kage found himself in the midst of a group before he was aware of it—callers like himself. The blue and silver livery of the attendant servants, the arms on the carriage before the door, from which the callers had descended, might have shown him who it was, but that he was buried in a reverie and noticed nothing till it was too late. A brilliant girl (she really looked one), attired in violet velvet and ermine, with a dainty white bonnet just touching her lovely face, had her hand held out to him.

"Mrs. Canterbury!" he exclaimed, as he took it, emotion changing even yet the hue of his tale-telling countenance.

Mrs. Canterbury it was; and by her side, dressed young enough and gay enough for a girl in her teens, stood Mrs. Kage; Mr. Canterbury in attendance on both. Deprived of her anticipated season in town the previous year, Caroline had been quite determined not to be so this. As soon as Christmas was turned, she bade her husband see about engaging a house through a London agent; one had been found; and this, the second week in February, had witnessed their arrival in town.

Thomas Kage entered Mrs. Dunn's hall with them. Had he seen his way clear to going away again, he had certainly done so; but Mr. Canterbury had taken him by the arm, and Caroline was talking to him. Was it Thomas Kage's fancy, or was it fact, that George Canterbury had become enfeebled both in mind and body?

Mrs. Dunn, all unconscious of the surprise in store for her, was sitting with her late husband's brother, Richard Dunn, who had called in. Thomas Kage involuntarily thought of Miss Belle Annesley's ridicule as his eyes fell on the iron-merchant. Perhaps that is not quite the proper designation to give him, but his business had entirely to do with iron.

He rented two floors somewhere in the City, his counting-house and other offices taking up one, living himself in the other. Any one less likely to be made the subject of ridicule than Richard Dunn could not well be conceived. He looked his full age, close on forty—a fine made, personable man, with intellectual features of calm good sense; his dark hair was tinged with grey, and was scanty on the top of his head. Mrs. Dunn stood with a momentary astonished stare, as if she hardly recognized her visitors. Neglecting the two ladies, she walked forward and kissed her father, and then turned to welcome them, but very coldly. The hand-grasp given to Thomas Kage was far warmer than any vouchsafed to either.

"I did not know you were in London, papa."

"Eh, child—no? We came up to—where is it, Caroline?"

"Belgrave Square," interposed Mrs. Kage, settling herself on a sofa, with a cushion at her back. "Dear Mr. Canterbury has taken it furnished for six months."

It was not so much Mrs. Kage's answer: there was nothing in that, except perhaps that it was a little impudent to take the words out of other people's mouths; it was the tone in which Mr. Canterbury spoke that caused his daughter's heart to leap with an unpleasant thrill. "Had his mind gone?" She mentally asked herself the question as she looked keenly at him. No, not quite, yet; but it had weakened much, and was gradually going. He was stooping, too—he, the hitherto upright, slender, apparently strong-framed man.

"What's the matter with you, papa?" asked Mrs. Dunn, abruptly. "You are very much changed."

"Changed for the better, dear Mrs. Dunn," simpered Mrs. Kage, who seemed not to care that Mr. Canterbury should answer his daughter. "Quite for the better, since he has had a good wife to take care of him."

Mrs. Dunn, fairly turning her back on the lady, crossed the room, and sat down by her father. He talked to her then about his little boy and the house in Belgrave Square, which was less convenient than he had hoped for; about her sisters Olive and Millicent; about Austin Rufort and his wife; and, in short, on any topic she chose to introduce. But through all his conversation there ran a sort of inane look and tone,

putting Lydia in mind of a child. She gave a terrible sigh, made up of anger and pain, and wondered if it would have been so soon thus had he not married.

"I have merely come to town to see my dear daughter settled in her house," spoke Mrs. Kage, for the benefit of the company generally, as she opened her fan of ivory and gold. "With my poor weak nerves, a London season might be too much for me; and I do not mean to try it. In a week or two I return home." This was really true. But perhaps Mrs. Dunn, with her experience of the innate encroaching propensities of the honourable lady, might have been excused for doubting it.

"A season in town is very exhausting, ma'am, for those who enter into its gaieties," said Mr. Dunn, in his politeness, perceiving that no one else answered Mrs. Kage. Her reply to this was to put up her eye-glass and look at him very coolly. "Not that I speak from experience," added Mr. Dunn. "I do not enter into anything of the kind myself: business men have no time for it."

Mrs. Kage dropped her glass at once.

"Business, oh!" said she.

"Why did you not come down to Jane's wedding, Lydia?" asked Mr. Canterbury, in the midst of a sudden pause.

"Well, to tell you the truth, papa, I do not care to go to Chilling," she plainly answered. "There have been so many changes, you know: I couldn't witness them and keep my temper. They are bad enough to hear of; they would be worse to see."

"She was married in December. Olive thought you would come and stay Christmas."

"Ah, yes, poor Olive! I spent my Christmas at home, papa."

They had formed into couples, as it were—Lydia with her father, Thomas Kage and Mrs. Canterbury. The disjointed ones were Mrs. Kage and the iron-merchant, who were on opposite sofas.

"You will take me out sometimes, will you not, Thomas?" Caroline pleadingly asked. "If my husband has to go with me too much, and be up late, I think he may break down. We have secured a good opera-box."

"I am sorry to have to decline, Mrs. Canterbury," was the decidedly chilling answer. "You must not depend on me. I have no time to give to gaiety, and therefore keep out of it altogether. Work and dissipation will not get on side by side."

"At least you will come to see us in Belgrave Square," was all she rejoined in her mortification.

"Thank you."

"You have not been again to Chilling, Thomas."

"No; I have been busy this winter."

"I am going to be presented at the first Drawing-room," she said in a minute, with gleeful vanity. "I wish you could go too, and see me in my court-dress: it is to be white lace and satin and diamonds."

Thomas Kage smiled. "Diamonds, eh?"

"Beautiful diamonds—the most magnificent set you ever saw! I have brought them up with me. They were the first Mrs. Canterbury's."

"And were given by her on her death-bed to my sister Olive," spoke up Mrs. Dunn, sharply. "You were present at the time, papa."

"Dear Thomas, do go out to the carriage and get my smelling-salts," shrieked out Mrs. Kage, with that unpleasant tone her voice took when annoyed. "You'll find them somewhere about the cushions."

In the carriage, on the nurse's lap—Judith—sat the boy, a lively little fellow, six months old now, with his mother's violet-blue eyes. Seizing Thomas Kage's finger, as babies will do, the blue eyes smiled in his face.

"It's you, is it, sir? Why, you have grown into a man! He looks well and hearty, nurse."

"Yes, sir; he is as healthy a little fellow as I'd wish to nurse. And he has a sweet temper," she added fondly; "quite his father's, it is."

Releasing his finger, and patting gently the little face, Thomas Kage looked for the bottle of salts—a beautifully-cut crystal with a gold stopper. Sending it in by Mrs. Dunn's servant, he walked away.

CHAPTER XVII.

LOVE AT LAST.

If Miss Belle Annesley had brains for any one thing more than another, it was music: in that she excelled, and she sang sweetly. To see her at her harp was a charming sight; to stand and turn over the music for her at the piano while she sang, was, to one man at least, the acme of human bliss; and that man was Richard Dunn. Her boast to Thomas Kage had not been an idle one.

"There is no passion fools us like that of love." It has, indeed, been well said and sung. Here was this middle-aged sensible man—one of the most respected in the higher ranks of the commercial world—burning to lay himself and his wealth at the feet of that flighty child. He had been caught by the winning ways, the laughing eyes, and the blue ribbons of this fairy girl; and all the arguments of all the sages that the world ever produced, could not have convinced him that she would be for him an unsuitable wife. Evening after evening, when the occupations of the day were over, found him at Mrs. Annesley's. There he would sit listening to her songs, and fancying himself, not in Paradise Terrace, but in a real Paradise.

She detected his love; *she* saw the nature of his attentions. When does a woman, and a vain one, no matter how young she may be, ever mistake these signs? And though Belle Annesley ridiculed him and his hopes behind his back—as she had done to Thomas Kage—she practised all sorts of little arts and coquetries before his face, which she knew were enthralling to him, and drew his heart the closer to her. She had not the smallest purpose in the world in doing this, except her love of admiration and of teasing.

Mrs. Annesley, seeing things dimly, as an interested looker-on often does, did not interfere one way or the other. It seemed next to impossible that Richard Dunn—the grave, staid City man, the wealthy iron-merchant—could cast a serious

thought to her frivolous daughter. She was the very essence of cold propriety—as was once before said—and how she came to have so giddy a child was a marvel to the world. A vast deal more giddy, Miss Belle, than the stern woman suspected. Had she known of the flirting scrapes Belle sometimes drifted into, she would have gone crazy. There was not any harm in Belle Annesley, and she by no means deserved the epithet that has of late come into use—"fast." Wild and thoughtless was she—a careless, flitting butterfly, who held hearts to be very light articles, and had not as yet felt her own touched. With it all, she was a tender little plant, not very able to bear rough and rude winds, should they ever assail her.

I wish there was time to tell of an acquaintance she fell heedlessly into with a handsome foreign gentleman of magnificent whiskers. His behaviour was good; and Belle, through a mistake for which no one was responsible, understood that he was staying with a nobleman, the Duke of Derbyshire. "Staying with," in Belle's idea, could mean nothing but visiting. When the dénouement came, it was discovered that he was only the duke's cook—a very capable man in his profession, and by no means ill-born, enjoying too, a very large salary. That was really a lesson to Belle, and for some time she was tolerably steady.

Meanwhile, Mr. Dunn, intending to quit the City and come westward, took on lease one of the larger houses in Paradise Square, and was busy furnishing it.

One day Miss Belle, in her saucy way, told him he would want a wife when he went into it. They happened to be alone. Mr. Dunn seized on the occasion and said yes, he should: would she be the wife? Belle affected to be taken with the most intense surprise, and almost as good as retorted that he had better make an offer to her grandmother. The episode passed off without Mr. Dunn's having very much compromised himself. A listener might have been in doubt whether he really meant to put the question, or had intended it as a joke.

And somehow with that moment his eyes opened to his folly, and he knew that he should for ever thank his propitious stars that the frivolous girl, in her caprice, had been wiser than he. But it does not fall to the lot of all of us to do foolish things

and not be talked of. How it got about, mischief only knew; but rumours of Mr. Dunn's forthcoming marriage, or at least of the offer, went spreading abroad: whether whispered by the girl in her heedlessness he never knew. They penetrated even to the deaf ears of Mrs. Garston; who, as deaf people often do, took up the tale à tort et à travers.

"So we shall soon have to congratulate you upon giving up your bachelorship," she said, one day when he had gone in to see her. Mr. Dunn became the colour of a red rose. Who could have been talking to *her* of his affairs? "If you take a wife at all, it's time you set about it," pursued the ancient lady, "for you are hard upon forty, my dear. You and my poor son —who lived but a day—were born in the same winter."

"How's your deafness, ma'am?" asked Mr. Dunn. "It was very bad when I was last here."

"Oh, that's better, Richard. I don't make mistakes now. She is a good, prudent, sensible girl, that Miss Annesley; one in a thousand."

"Is she?" thought Mr. Dunn.

"Though full young for you, Dickey. That gossiping woman, Mrs. Williams, used to say she knew you were up to your eyes in love with An—Anna—what's her name?—Annabel. I asked her one day if she did not give Richard Dunn credit for more sense than to fall in love with a flighty young creature, only fit for a dancing-girl at Astley's. But you have chosen well, my dear, and have shown your sense."

"What *are* you talking of?" asked Mr. Dunn.

"Isn't it true, then?" returned the old lady. "Are you not going to be married?"

"Not a bit of it!" exclaimed the merchant wrathfully. "I'd see all the girls at—York, first!"

"The tales that people invent!" cried Mrs. Garston, heaving up her hands in wonder. "Somebody came here the other day, and said you had made an offer to Miss Annesley, and were furnishing your new house in splendour for the wedding."

"She's too young and flighty for me, ma'am," he roared in her ear. "Never you fear that I shall marry her."

"Who's too young and flighty?"

"Miss Belle Annesley."

"I didn't allude to *her!*" screamed Mrs. Garston, rapping her stick wildly on the floor in her deafness and wrath. "It's her cousin Sarah. I hope you don't call *her* flighty—a well-brought up, sweet-tempered, elegant young woman. You might be proud to get her, Dickey."

"She is not far wrong," grumbled the merchant to himself when he went away. "I have sometimes questioned, even when in the height of my infatuation, whether I had not neglected the gold to hug the gilding."

The spring grew older; but there is nothing much to relate about it. Mrs. Canterbury was the gayest of the gay London world; her husband tried to be so, and made a signal failure of it. The poor drooping old man (so upright not long ago) ought to be at home at the Rock, people said; and Mrs. Garston gave the young wife one of her sharp reprimands on the score. Thomas Kage called on them once a month or so; and that was the extent of the intercourse he allowed himself with Mr. and Mrs. Canterbury. Caroline took refuge in a fit of haughty resentment, and let him follow his own course. Not until July did she and her husband depart for the Rock.

Summer passed on, and Thomas Kage came home from circuit, on which he had gone. His coming and going mattered little to any one, except, perhaps, Mrs. Garston; for he confined himself mostly to his work and his chambers. Sarah Annesley was then at Chilling, whither she had departed on a long visit. Which left Miss Belle comparatively free.

That young lady's turn was to come, however; and she, who had laughed at others, was soon to have her own heart touched to infatuation. For so fashionable a man as Captain Dawkes to appear in London when every one that *he* would have deemed of consequence was out of it, argued something under the surface. For more than two years Captain Dawkes had been in Ireland with his regiment. He now suddenly re-appeared in London. On leave, he said. People can get through money in Ireland, if so inclined, just as fast as in England; and Barnaby Dawkes had found it so, to his cost. The gallant Captain had come to the very end of his tether, available and unavailable. He pleaded sickness at head-

quarters, and got leave to absent himself from duty; his real business being not sickness, but to move every propitiatory power to enable him to raise the wind. The chief power—that is, the chief hope, Mrs. Garston—was not propitious. Quite the contrary. It really seemed to Barnaby Dawkes that the old lady must be gifted with a kind of second sight; so accurately did she divine the state of affairs, and recount it to his face. At first Barnaby thought Keziah must have been talking; but he found she had not. It was all good guess-work. Mrs. Garston said he should have no help from her; the money-lenders were not to be seduced; and Barnaby Dawkes, captain and gentleman, sat down and seriously asked himself what there remained to do.

It might have been pure pastime—pour faire passer le temps; or in his love of a pretty face—Belle's, or any other; or because his usual expensive life was not obtainable under the present adverse circumstances, that Captain Dawkes took, during his sojourn in London, to going a good deal to Mrs. Annesley's. Keziah was tolerably intimate there; with her brother their acquaintance had been very slight. A sober, moderate household, such as that, was not one likely to attract Captain Dawkes. During his absence in Ireland, the frivolous child, Belle, had grown into a very lovely young woman—if indeed the term "woman" can be applied to a girl not out of her teens. Captain Barnaby Dawkes was agreeably struck, and began to talk in whispers to her forthwith.

How do people fall in love? What subtle instinct induces it? While one man, good and honest and worthy, will press his suit in vain—and, in spite of all reason, a woman can no more persuade her heart to care for him than for the idle wind—another will step in and take it by storm.

It was so with Annabel Annesley. Ere Barnaby Dawkes had called at the house three times, her cheeks would glow, her whole pulses thrill at his approach. He was a handsome man, as Miss Belle counted good looks; but this had nothing to do with the enthralment, for she knew that if he had been as ugly as a satyr her love would be just the same. With her whole heart and life she had learnt to love Barnaby Dawkes.

How it changed her! Her very nature seemed to have been

replaced by one essentially different. The thoughtless butterfly, ready ever to sip sweets from all the world, whose pleasure seemed to have lain in meeting attractive men, and laughing with and at them, became as sedate as a judge. When Miss Annesley came home from Chilling, at the end of October, she wondered what had come to the child—all her lightness had gone. Gone, to be superseded by a tender, subdued joyousness, shining ever from the now shy eyes. Belle did not care to go out now; she stayed at home and sang her songs—love-songs always—in a tender, half-hushed tone, or worked slippers or other trumpery, and was as good as gold; ever seeming to be listening for the step of visitors. Belle Annesley had made her life's choice, for weal or for woe.

It might be that Captain Dawkes was a little touched also; that what had been begun from the lightest of all motives was continued because he had grown to like the pastime. At any rate he persevered in it. A tall, fine man he, with glossy, fierce, dark whiskers, that might set the world a-longing and a barber in ecstacies; and she the sweetest little blue-eyed fairy to be found in London. If contrasts attract, as wise folk say, then the episode in these two lives need not be wondered at.

In an unfashionable part of Pimlico, in a quiet street through which nothing more aristocratic bowled than an occasional cab or the baker's cart, lived Miss Dawkes. She occupied the drawing-room floor, and had so done for some years now. When Barnaby was in London she moved to a small room at the top of the house, and slept amongst her boxes, leaving the better chamber behind the sitting-room for him, if he chose to come home to it. He gave his address at his club: never here. The sitting-room was of very moderate size, with drab curtains to the windows, and a drab and green table-cover, both somewhat the worse for wear. Miss Dawkes's income amounted to just one hundred and twenty pounds a-year; so she had to be content with small lodgings.

It was a gloomy evening in November, seven o'clock striking by the London churches. Miss Dawkes had dined at one o'clock on beefsteak-pie. The remainder of the pie—a small one—had just been put upon the table for supper, with bread-

and-cheese. Keziah liked good living, and would very much have preferred to dine luxuriously at six or seven; but fate and fortune were adverse. She was subject to frightful headaches, and never dared take her supper much later than seven. The fire burnt clear, the lamp was bright and well turned on, for Barnaby might arrive at any moment, though she did not particularly expect him.

A rush of wind and rain in at the street-door below as it opened, and Captain Dawkes came up, his coat and umbrella dripping. Keziah took both from him, and went where she could leave them to dry.

"Cursed weather," remarked the captain when she returned. "It's raining like cats and dogs."

"Whose umbrella is that, Barnaby?" she asked.

"Whose? Why, mine."

'Indeed, it is not. This is something like yours, but it is a little smaller, and has 'S. A.' engraved on the handle."

A pause. Captain Dawkes, taking up the whole of the fire, and gently touching his luxuriant whiskers, was admiring his face in the very small pier-glass. "I have left mine at the Annesleys', then, and brought one of theirs away by mistake. 'S. A.'? That must stand for the parson's daughter. She is going to be married to Richard Dunn."

"What, Sarah Annesley! Well, I thought it was coming to it," slowly added Miss Dawkes. "He has grown to like her, I suppose; and she, as any one may see, likes him. How do you know it?"

"Belle whispered it to me."

"It will be a very suitable match; but he was in love with little Belle once."

"Like his impudence," remarked Captain Dawkes. "I wish I had his money."

"Will you take some supper, Barnaby?"

The captain turned to survey the table. "D'ye call that supper?"

"It is the best we have to-night. They told me downstairs they could not cook anything, or I would have ordered you a cutlet. The parlour-floor has a party."

"I wonder you stop in these lodgings, Keziah."

"If I moved elsewhere, I should be no better off; perhaps worse. And I am used to them; I don't care to go."

"You want the energy to move, Keziah."

"Not the energy, Barby dear—the money."

Captain Dawkes growled at Fate. "I wish the devil had all the money, Keziah! There'd be no bother then; should all be in the same box."

She was helping the pie, and putting the choicest morsels on his plate, with every drain of gravy the spoon would take up. On her own plate she put the hard ends of crust, the dry meat. Barnaby Dawkes watched all this, but never an objection made he; and he sat down and began his supper without so much as a word of thanks. He had been living entirely upon his sister for two months now. It seemed his province to take all the good things of life that came in his way, though she had to starve upon the worst. Keziah had spoilt and pampered him.

"You are hungry, Barby."

"Well I may be! I have had no dinner. Stone asked me to dine with him, but I found I should meet some one I'd rather not meet just now."

"Have you seen Aunt Garston to-day?"

"Yes. And she threw her stick at me."

"Oh, Barby! I suppose you put her out."

Captain Dawkes scraped up the crumbs on his plate, for he was really hungry. Keziah resented the company on the parlour-floor, and wished she could have cooked him the missing cutlet.

"You should have had something better had I thought you would come home to dinner, Barby."

"I should order pigeon-pies, Keziah; or chicken. Beef-steak-pies are common kind of things."

Keziah inwardly wished she could. She began mentally to ask herself when this state of affairs would end. Not for her own sake, or for the expense and contrivance it cost her, but for Barnaby's.

"I do my best, Barnaby. Oftentimes I wonder that, with my small income, the best is as good as it is."

Captain Dawkes, considering his sister as nobody, had turned his back on the table and sat hiding the fire, bending

over it and twirling his moustache. "I suppose it will have to come to selling-out, Keziah."

"And if it does? You could not keep the money, and would be worse off than you are now. With the proceeds of the commission gone, you would simply be a beggar."

Yes. And it was a very gloomy look-out. Captain Dawkes saw that as well as any one. No man liked to stand better with the world than he. As to living this half-hidden, make-shift life with Keziah—as he one day politely told her—he would rather hang himself.

"And after selling-out, the next thing will be to sell myself," continued the captain gloomily

"Sell yourself!"

"To a woman. There will be nothing less left for it, Keziah. I suppose you wouldn't like to see me with a Mrs. Dawkes; but it will have to come to it."

A keen pain shot through Keziah's heart. How keen, let those tell who have experienced the same.

"She will have eight or nine hundred a-year when the old mother drops off, which I think won't be long first. That will be better than a prison."

Keziah tried to swallow the piece of cheese she was eating, but her throat seemed to close to it. Instinct more than reason, Barnaby's visit perhaps most of all, guided her to a right guess.

"Are you speaking of Belle Annesley?"

"Right you are."

"She will have but three hundred a-year, Barnaby. Her half-brother out in the torrid zone, Walter Annesley, takes the larger portion of it."

"Right in theory, Keziah, wrong in fact. Walter Annesley is dying, and Belle will take the whole. The last West-India mail brought news of some slight accident he had met with; the one in to-day says it has turned out serious, and there's not a chance of his life. As things have come to the present low ebb with me, it may be worth while thinking of her."

"Do you care for her very much?"

"She's a nice little thing."

Another lump to swallow.

"Enough to take her with only the three hundred?"

"Certainly not. I'd see her somewhere first. Unless I had money myself, I wouldn't wed a girl with only that sum if she were a royal princess."

"Then, Barnaby, wait until Walter Annesley shall really be dead before you commit yourself."

"I never intended to do otherwise. You can't teach me, Keziah. What do you say?—money go to Walter Annesley's children? No; it comes to Belle if he dies in his mother's lifetime. A fellow went in and saw the will for me at Doctors' Commons."

Keziah might be pardoned if a doubt crossed her.

"That would be a rather unusual will, would it not, Barby?"

"Perhaps," indifferently answered Barby. "Curious to say, there's no provision made for the fellow's marrying; contingency doesn't seem to have occurred to the old father. If Walter survives his stepmother, the share goes to him; if he dies in his mother's lifetime, all goes to Belle. Shall wait and see how things turn. If certificate of funeral comes over, may go in for her then; don't know yet."

In Keziah Dawkes's heart of hearts she thought her brother would, from his two special propensities, love of roving and love of spending, be an unfit man to marry, unless the acquired fortune were commensurate with the sacrifice.

"Eight hundred a-year for you would be nothing, Barnaby. It might about keep you in gloves and cigars."

"Seems to be standing just now between me and that delectable place the workhouse," responded the captain. "Shall make up my mind, one way or the other, when next West-India mail comes in."

"And that may bring different news," said Keziah dreamily. "And the girl might not have you, after all."

"Can make tolerably sure of *that* beforehand," returned the gallant captain, a complacent smile on his satisfied face. "I wish old mother Garston was dead and buried, and I had her money."

"She says she has made her will, and left all away from you, Barby."

"Don't believe her, though."

"Oh, Barby! She says awfully hard things, but they are nearly always true. At the best, things with regard to her are at an uncertainty."

"Yes; the uncertainty is the devil of it," retorted Captain Dawkes.

Keziah rang for the tray to be taken away. Whilst this was being done, he went to the window and looked out. The heavy rain had been only a storm; the streets were drying again. Captain Dawkes called for his coat and the wet umbrella, and went out.

Keziah sat on alone. Books and a newspaper lay on the table, but she took up neither. The world that night seemed to be steeped in a gloomy vista, the future to have an ominous, undefined shadow spread before it. In former days she had been blindly tolerant to her brother's faults; but his exceeding recklessness in getting into debt, his utter improvidence, were very plain to her now. She took his part against Mrs. Garston and all else, but she could not help seeing that the stern old lady had good reason for her sternness. "If I set him free, he will begin at once and run up a fresh list of debts, and where is it to end?" Mrs. Garston had impressively asked. The very words came into Keziah's mind now as she sat; and all the answer she could give was, "I don't know where."

No, Keziah did not. And she might thank Heaven that the foreknowledge was spared her.

Returning the umbrella and getting his own, afforded an excuse for paying a night-visit at Mrs. Annesley's. Belle happened to be alone in the drawing-room when he entered. She was seated on a footstool at a corner of the hearth, a book lying listlessly on her lap, and her favourite blue ribbons falling from her golden hair. Up she started, her whole frame in a joyous tremor, her cheeks damask, her heart wild. But in manner she stood quiet as a lamb. Nevertheless the experienced captain saw the signs; his great dark eyes bent on her their most fascinating light.

"Alone!" he whispered, making a prisoner of her hands.

She hardly knew what she answered him. In the tumult that his presence induced, words fell from her mechanically.

Mamma had stayed in the dining-room, finishing a letter to Walter; Sarah had stepped in to see Mrs. Lowther.

"My pretty one!" exclaimed the captain, who was an adept in charming phrases.

"I—we—did not expect to see you again this evening," said poor, fluttering, confused Belle.

"I would never be away from you if I could help it," said the great story-teller. And the words were sweeter to her ear than the sweetest honey.

"But I fancy sometimes your mother does not care to see me here too often," he added, never having released the hands. "I have an excuse for her to-night. What will you do without me, Belle, when I go back to Ireland?"

A pang shot through her heart. When *that* should happen, all the sunshine would go out of her young life. Her cheek paled a little; the blue eyes, lifted momentarily to his, held tears. Captain Dawkes suddenly clasped her to him, and kissed her face with what seemed to Belle heaven's own kisses.

"My darling!"

But Mrs. Annesley's approaching step was heard. The captain took his seat decorously on a remote chair; and Belle hid her eyes and her blushing face, feeling as if she were in a dream of some sweet enchantment.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FUNERAL.

"WELL, if he ain't a grand sight. Why, his head's a-stretching all down, past here, and his tail's not out o' the lodge-gates yet!"

The speaker was a country woman, peeping from the half-open door of one of a row of cottages. The doors of all were similarly being peeped through, though the shutters were closed: and the women and children who were thus gazing exhibited signs of having left their household occupations to look at the passing sight.

The intelligent reader may imagine, by the woman's remark, that some indescribable animal of fabulous length was looming by. But it was nothing of the sort: for the "head" was represented by two solemn mutes, gorgeously apparelled in the blackest of black, and the "tail" by a couple of undertaker's men, equally orthodox to look upon. The centre comprised all the paraphernalia of a most extravagant funeral—coaches, horses, plumes, velvets, fringe, bâtons, attendants, carriers, mourners, ribbons, crape, white handkerchiefs, and pomp and vanity.

"I wonder what he cost, now!" continued the woman, in the vernacular of the locality, which did not pay special regard to its genders. "He'll be a sight to remember, he will; and to tell our children on, when we grows old."

"Ah, she have done the thing handsome, she have; she haven't spared no money," replied the matron at the next door, to whom the observation had been made.

"No more she oughtn't to spare it," retorted the first, in indignant tones. "Ain't it the last money he'll cost her?"

"Except the moniment over his grave in the church. They'll put him up a brave one, from the flagstones to the roof. But, I say, what was up, that it were put off from yesterday till to-day? The bur'al were fixed for yesterday."

"Some relation of young madam's, that had to come from Lunnon for it, and he didn't get here."

The speaker turned her head, and saw for the first time that a stranger was standing at her elbow. A tall, dark, gentlemanly-looking man, who had been sauntering listlessly up the road, and halted to gaze at the passing procession.

"Whose funeral is that?" he inquired of the woman.

"Mr. Canterbury's, sir," she replied, dropping a curtsey. "Mr. Canterbury's of the Rock."

"A magnificent funeral. He must have been a man of some note."

"The richest gentleman for miles round, sir," answered the other woman, whose tongue was the readiest. "He were our landlord."

"Ah," returned the stranger, glancing down the row of cottages, "that explains why you are all shut up."

"There's not a house on the estate, sir, poor or rich, but what's shut close to-day. He has been took off sudden, like, at last; and not to say an old man neither. But he has been ailing and ailing ever so long!"

"Does he leave a family?"

"A young wife and child. He married her three summers agone. His own daughters were older nor she. Good ladies they be, and—— There, sir, look, look! In that shiny black coach-and-four, what's a passing now, there's a gentleman a-sitting forrard; you can see him well."

"What of him?" inquired the listener, wondering at the abruptness of the gossiping woman.

"It's Mr. Rufort, sir, Lord Rufort's son; and he married one of the young ladies, Miss Jane. He is our Rector, but another gentleman is to bury Mr. Canterbury, and Mr. Rufort goes as a mourner. There! in that next coach, that old gentleman with grey hair, a-sitting bolt upright, that's Lord Rufort. It's just the way he sits his horse, and never bends his head one way nor t'other. The young ladies have not been friendly at the Rock of late, but they have went up since their father was took worse; all but Mrs. Rufort, and she's ill, and couldn't leave the Rectory."

But that the gentleman, listening to all this, was very much preoccupied with his own affairs, which were not very satisfactory at the present moment, and accorded only half an ear and no real attention, he might have recognized the deceased as one whom he knew at least by name. But it was a positive fact that he did not do so.

"What is this village called?" he asked.

"Chilling, sir."

"Chilling, eh! And a chilling kind of place it seems to be," he mentally concluded, as he went strolling on his way again.

The funeral procession moved on to a distant church, to the Canterbury vault; and in an hour's time the living portion of it moved back again. A very few of the followers entered the Rock; the greater number stepped into their private carriages, and were driven to their respective homes. Lord Rufort, when requested to go in, started off to his chariot with his iron-grey

head in the air, as if there was something indoors that displeased him. Mr. Carlton, of the Hall, went in; Mr. Rufort, Mr. Norris, and Thomas Kage. The women, as we heard, said the ceremony had been put off for a day; it was on account of Thomas Kage. When summoned to attend the funeral, he had pleaded inability to absent himself from London, and then there went up a more peremptory request, urging his attendance.

The family were assembled in the library. Mrs. Canterbury, young and lovely, in her heavy black robes and a dandified apology for a widow's cap, sat with her boy on her knee; Mrs. Kage, a mass of jet, with a new spreading black fan, was on a sofa near her; on the other side were the two Miss Canterburys. Mrs. Rufort was unable to leave home; Mrs. Dunn was somewhere in Germany. Thomas Kage shook hands with Mrs. Canterbury in silence, and simply bowed to the rest. He had arrived only an hour before that fixed for the funeral.

The weighty business for which they were assembled was that of hearing the will read. Perhaps no one present, except the solicitor who had drawn it up, knew what its provisions would really turn out to be.

Mr. Norris proceeded to read it; and the listeners found that rumour, for once in a way, had been correct. The unjust testament, formerly so much talked about, had never been altered. Almost all the property was bequeathed to the new wife and child; Mrs. Kage inherited ten thousand pounds, the four daughters of the deceased five thousand each.

"'And I appoint Thomas Charles Carr Kage trustee for my son Thomas until he shall attain his majority, and I appoint him also sole executor.'"

The above sentence (legally confirmed in other portions of the will), when read out with emphasis by Mr. Norris, was heard with surprise by several in the room, and with the most intense surprise by Thomas Kage himself. His thin face flushed, and the thought that crossed him was, "I shall refuse to act."

"Would any one wish to look at the will?" inquired Mr. Norris, breaking the silence that fell upon the room.

"Oh dear, no," murmured Mrs. Kage, in her simpering,

affected voice, as she fanned herself with the great black fan and sprinkled some essence on the floor. "You can put it up, Mr. Norris."

Perhaps the lawyer deemed that the Honourable Mrs. Kage did not represent the interests of the whole company, for he held it out, and glanced at Mr. Rufort. But Mr. Rufort gave a bow of denial.

"There is no more to be seen than you have read, Norris, and our seeing it would not alter it," observed the plain-speaking Mr. Carlton. "My dears," he added, walking up to the Miss Canterburys, "is it your wish to look at it?"

"To what end?—as you observe," replied Miss Canterbury. "No."

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Thomas Kage, apparently intending the apology to be general, but speaking to Mr. Norris. "How is it that I am appointed trustee and executor?"

"I obeyed Mr. Canterbury's directions, sir; I know no more," was the answer. And Thomas Kage, who would have liked to say two or three things, thought better of it, and compressed his lips to silence.

Mr. Rufort rose to leave. Mrs. Kage, who seemed to be assuming a good deal of authority, and to cloak it under a more than customary display of inertness, stretched out her fan and tapped him.

"My dear Mr. Rufort, you are not going! We expect you to remain. There's a cold collation laid in the dining-room."

"Thank you. Mrs. Rufort's indisposition obliges me to go home. Olive, shall I take charge of you and Millicent?" he continued in low tones to Miss Canterbury.

Miss Canterbury's reply was to rise and put her arm within his. "We will also wish you good day, Mrs. Canterbury."

"Dear me, how very unsociable!" broke in Mrs. Kage, as she had recourse to her smelling-salts. "We thought you would all have stayed with us, dearest Miss Canterbury."

The young widow rose and spoke in some hesitation. "Olive, I shall be happy if you will remain. Do not bear malice. This disposal of his property was my husband's own act."

"Malice!" returned Miss Canterbury, and her tone was

certainly free from it, "we do not bear any; you are mistaken if you think so. To-day is not a day for the indulgence of malice, Mrs. Canterbury."

"At least say farewell in cordiality."

Mrs. Canterbury put out her hand, and Olive took it. Olive then stooped and kissed the child, her young half-brother, a gentle little fellow, now two years old. Whatever undue influence had been at work to give him the fortune, part of which ought to have been hers and her sisters', it was no doing of the child's, and Olive Canterbury was too just to visit it upon him. Millicent also kissed him, and followed her sister and Mr. Rufort from the room.

"And now I'll go," cried Mr. Carlton, "and I wish you good day, ladies. And I wish *you* luck over your office, sir," he added in a marked manner to Mr. Kage. "It is one I and my old friend, Lord Rufort, scorned to undertake. Good day, Norris."

Mr. Norris had been folding up the will, and now laid it on the table. "Sir," said he to Mr. Kage, "any information or assistance that you may require, I shall be ready to afford." And again the words of rejection rose to Thomas Kage's lips, and again he did not speak them.

The lawyer bowed himself out of the room, and Mrs. Kage rose. The affair had altogether gone off so much more peaceably than she had anticipated, that, inwardly, she was in a glow of congratulation.

"I feel inclined to retire and compose myself for an hour. These gloomy epochs in daily life try one's nerves distressingly: it is a mercy they don't come often. Of all ceremonies, funerals are the worst for delicate susceptibilities, and a will-reading—— Thomas, you see, now, why a second and more urgent summons was despatched to you," Mrs. Kage broke off her fanning and her sentence to say. "I am sure you will look well after my dear child's interests and the little chickabiddy's."

The little chickabiddy had betaken himself to the window, and stood on a chair in his short black frock, looking out. As Thomas Kage came back from closing the door after the lady and her fan, Mrs. Canterbury could but notice the marked expression of severity on his countenance.

"Thomas, you are angry! What is the matter?"

"Allow me to put the question to you, Mrs. Canterbury, that Mr. Norris could not answer. Whose doing was it to make me executor to this will?"

"I think my husband was the first to propose it; and I and mamma gladly acquiesced. There is no one I can feel so safe with as you."

"You ought to have inquired, first of all, whether I was willing to act."

"Would you have refused?"

"Yes. As others had already done."

"*Others* had not," she returned. "There was only Mr. Carlton."

"I beg your pardon. There was Lord Rufort."

"But Lord Rufort was an interested party. He wanted a lot of money left to Jane. My husband only asked those two."

"I wish he had asked me. I feel this as a blow. I really do."

Mrs. Canterbury did not like the tone. "You had better decline to act now," she said in petulant resentment.

"I think I shall," was his unexpected answer.

"Oh, Thomas? You do not care what becomes of my interests?"

"I am anxious for your best interests, Caroline. But, ere consenting to take part in a thing like this, a man should sit down and count the cost."

"What cost?"

"This will is one that will have censures cast upon it from far and wide. The world will bitterly condemn it and all who have part in it."

"We know what the world's scorn is worth."

"Ay, Caroline; but I spoke of the scorn of good men. I, as your relative and sole executor to the will, cannot hope to escape it; complicity is the least reproach that will be thrown at me. It has already begun. When Miss Canterbury and her sister bowed to me on quitting the room, and when Mr. Carlton followed with his marked words, I felt like a guilty accomplice, conscious that I was appearing so to them."

"I remember, a long time ago, you took *their* part!"

"Yes," he interrupted, "and the conversation I then held with you ought to have prevented my being thus drawn in. Caroline, I said all to you then that I thought I was justified in saying. I besought you not to suffer so unjust a will to stand; not to deprive Mr. Canterbury's daughters of their rights. Were the case mine, I would cut off my right hand before it should so grasp the property of others."

Mrs. Canterbury let fall some tears. "My husband was a kind husband to me, and I will not hear this reproach cast upon his memory."

"I cast reproach on you, not on Mr. Canterbury. He is gone. And were he not, were he sitting by your side now, I would honestly aver before him that to you reproach was due, rather than to him. Oh, Caroline, is it possible you can fancy the world does not see this transaction in its true light? That Mr. Canterbury was influenced to make this unjust will, is palpable as the stars in heaven. The active element may have been your mother; but your boasted neutrality was equally culpable. He loved his daughters; and by nature he was not an unjust man."

Mrs. Canterbury wept in silence. Though she had never loved her husband, she felt natural grief at his death. In this moment she was feeling it much, and it was mixed up with a little self-reproach and a great deal of vexation.

"Just tell me one thing," she sobbed forth, as she drew her quiet little boy from the window to her knee: "is this a fitting theme for the very day that my husband is put into his grave?"

"Perhaps it is not," he returned, "but the conversation arose from circumstances; neither of us entered upon it with premeditation. We will resume it to-morrow, Caroline; I will stay for it; and by that time I shall have reflected whether or not I will act."

"No," dissented Mrs. Canterbury. "If you choose to take until to-morrow to decide whether you will perform the part of a friend to me and this fatherless babe, you must do so; but if you have more to say on this point, say it now, for not another word will I listen to again."

"Not now: you have reminded me that to-day should be sacred."

"Now or never," she impetuously said; "it shall be for the last time."

"Very well. My decision cannot be given now; but I will say what I have to say, and offer the advice I wish to offer. Unpalatable though it may at first sound, I beseech you, Caroline, to weigh it well. It lies in your power to repair the injustice of the will: *do so*. At least, in a slight degree; I fear it would be useless for me, or any one, to urge more. Make over to the Miss Canterburys a sum which will secure to them the income recently allowed them by their father. And should this little fellow ever be taken from you," added Mr. Kage, laying his hand upon the child's head, "divide his fortune with them."

Mrs. Canterbury opened her eyes in astonishment. Give over money that would bring them in fifteen hundred a-year!—divide her substance with them in the event of the child's death! She truly thought Thomas Kage must be a little mad to suggest it.

"Your ideas were always Utopian, Thomas," she said, when a few almost angry words had passed.

"The time may come when you will see that it is what you ought to do," was his calm answer.

At least Mrs. Canterbury could not see it now. In her heart she was a miser, loving money; loving show, and all the other good things that money can bring. And she took refuge in a subterfuge.

"I would not so insult my husband's memory as to render his acts null and void. He apportioned his money as he judged well, and I shall abide by the decision."

"I will wish you good-bye for the present then, Caroline."

She held out her hand to him, looking almost beseechingly into his face.

"You will act, Thomas?"

"When I have made up my mind you shall know the result. I can scarcely see which way my duty lies."

As Mr. Kage was turning out of the park-gates into the high-road, he came suddenly upon a gentleman who seemed to be

looking about him with some curiosity; at the fine house, the magnificent old trees, the deer that liked to rub their antlers against the massive trunks. It was the stranger who had talked to the gazing and gossiping women earlier in the day. There ensued a mutual recognition.

"Kage, it's never you!"

"Captain Dawkes, I think. How are you? I supposed you had sailed for India. The departure of your regiment was announced some weeks ago."

"Captain Dawkes no longer, except by courtesy; I have sold out. Which way are you walking? This? I'll turn with you. All ways are the same to me, for I am an idle man just now, and a horribly bored one."

He put his arm uninvited within that of Mr. Kage, and they went onwards.

"I leave for London to-night," remarked Mr. Kage. "Are you making a stay here?"

"The Fates know. Kage, you are a good fellow; I remember that, of old; don't proclaim to everybody you meet in London that you have seen me here. I am in a mess again, and am keeping out of the reach of sheriffs' officers."

"The old story," said Mr. Kage pleasantly. "Be at ease. I will forget that I have seen you."

"There's a solitary public-house in a hamlet about a mile-and-a-half from this, and I've taken up my quarters at it, telling the people I'm here for fishing. I got to it the night before last."

"From London?"

"London has not seen me this many a week past. From meandering about from one rural village to another, like a wandering ghost. I wish I was a ghost sometimes."

"Is Mrs. Garston still inexorable?"

"I suppose you know whether she is, or not, better than I do," retorted Captain Dawkes. "You see her often; I, never."

"I assure you I know nothing of your affairs. As a proof of it, I imagined you had sailed with the regiment. It must be quite a twelvemonth now since Mrs. Garston has allowed me to mention your name. She told me she would throw her

stick at my head if I ever breathed it again; and I think she meant it."

"Dreadful old tyrant!" mutttered the ex-captain.

Fate and fortune had been playing fast and loose with Barnaby Dawkes since we last had the pleasure of seeing him. Walter Annesley recovered, instead of dying, and Belle lost the promotion intended for her by the gallant captain. He continued to whisper love to her, to make the sunshine of her existence, and the girl was too happy even to think of anything more. The next turn in his fortune was a legacy inherited by Keziah. Of course Barnaby fingered the whole of it; it relieved him from some of his worst embarrassments, and sent him back to his duty in Ireland. More debts were made then—it really seemed a mania with Captain Dawkes to make them, as if he were utterly unable to keep straight—and the old ones, unsettled yet, began to press heavily upon him. No resource remained but selling his commission, unless Mrs. Garston would relent. Over to London he came again, and tried her. Keziah tried her. No. The best thing for Barby would be to sell out, was all the answer she gave. And Barby did so. A little time of ease and extravagance, and of making sweet love again to Belle Annesley, and then more debts cropped up. Captain Dawkes, quite on his beam-ends now, had to disappear from the busy world, and hide himself in remote districts. It was a strange chance that brought him to Chilling.

"What are you doing in this part of the country, Kage?"

"I came to attend Mr. Canterbury's funeral. Have you seen much of the scenery about here? It is very beautiful."

"What do I care for scenery? If it yielded gold-mines, I might look at it. People are saying his will is an unjust one."

"Very unjust," replied Thomas Kage; "Mr. Canterbury has left his large fortune to his wife and son, to the exclusion of his daughters. The good old notions of right and wrong seem to be out of fashion nowadays."

"Completely so," assented Mr. Dawkes. "Witness the conduct of that selfish old party in London next door to you."

Thomas Kage smiled.

"I don't know the Canterburys, for my part," observed Captain Dawkes; "it's all the same to me how the money's

left. Didn't know their place was in these parts until to-day. She is uncommonly charming, they say."

He alluded to Mrs. Canterbury. Thomas Kage did not encourage the conversation, and turned off to pay a visit to the Rectory, wishing his companion good day. But when he came out again, there stood Captain Dawkes, waiting for another parting word.

"Kage, could you do a fellow a service?"

"What is it?"

"Lend me ten pounds. I'm regularly down in the world, and it will be an act of charity."

"I have nothing like so much money with me," replied Mr. Kage. "And I must keep something for my fare up."

Captain Dawkes bit his lip.

"Couldn't you borrow from some of the rich people down here?"

"No, Dawkes, I cannot do that. I will see what I can lend you," he added, taking out his purse. "Five, six, and some silver. I can let you have four pounds, if it will be of any use."

"Make it five, Kage, make it five; you don't know how desperately I require it."

The tone was one of painful entreaty; and Thomas Kage, after a moment's hesitation, put five sovereigns into his hand. It would entail his getting back to London in the cheapest manner; but he was one who rather searched, than not, to make sacrifices for others. It was all one to Barnaby Dawkes; provided he got the money, Kage might take the stoker's place on the engine, and welcome.

"Try and say a good word for me with that ancient deaf mummy, Kage! She'll repay you the five pounds," continued the captain with cool assurance. "Tell her you let me have it to keep me out of the slough of despond in the shape of the nearest pool."

CHAPTER XIX.

MORE VIGOROUS THAN EVER.

In the dining-room at Mrs. Garston's, very much as we once saw them before, sat that ancient lady and Keziah Dawkes.

About nine months before, Miss Dawkes had rather mysteriously disappeared from London. Mysteriously, because she never said a word of her intention of going; neither did she disclose the place she might happen to be bound for. Since then, Mrs. Garston had received a letter from her occasionally, in which she stated she was travelling from place to place in search of health. The shrewd old lady knew that there was some private motive in all this, just as surely as though Keziah had told her; and she suspected it had reference to Barnaby; for Captain Dawkes had disappeared from London even longer ago than Keziah, and was now a myth. Time rolls on in its course in spite of us. Nearly twelve months had elapsed since the death of George Canterbury, and autumn tints were stealing again into the foliage.

Mrs. Garston decidedly grew younger; she was more vigorous in look and tongue and temper. The past twelve months seemed only to have renewed her strength. It had passed in an unusually peaceful manner, for neither Captain Dawkes nor Keziah came forth to persecute her on the score of his needs. For recreation, she had Thomas Kage, who passed most of his evenings with her, except when on circuit, and diligently waited on her, and read the news to her in the loudest tone he could command, and gave her his arm twice on a Sunday from the carriage-door to her pew in church—for she went to service twice always, in spite of her eighty years and her deafness—and was to her as a son.

But one day, when Mrs. Garston was least expecting it or thinking of it, Miss Dawkes walked into her dining-room. The old lady sat there in the morning, because she had the sunshine.

There ensued a slight explanation from Keziah, simply to the effect that she had come back to London again, most likely

for good, and then a passage-at-arms. The old lady sat upright, keen-eyed, deliberately inaccessible.

"Where's the use of your beating about the bush, Keziah? What is it to me that your old lodgings in Pimlico were let, and you've had to take up with another street? Tell the truth—you have only come here to ask for money."

"I have not asked you for any for a long time, Aunt Garston."

Mrs. Garston brought down her stick vehemently.

"Don't beat about the bush, I tell you. Have you come for money for Barby?"

"I have, aunt; and I hope you will hear me, for Barnaby's sake."

Straining all her faculties to listen, the dame caught the sense of the words. Keziah's belief was, that she heard better than before, and she mentally asked herself the question, "Was the ancient creature to go on living for ever?"

"Where have you been hiding yourself, Keziah?"

"I have been staying in the country, Aunt Garston. I actually went haymaking, do you know?"

Four or five irritable nods.

"Look here, Keziah Dawkes; I know just as well as you can tell me that you have been in hiding with Barby—keeping guard over him, maybe, and fencing him in from the consequence of his debts. But I choose to *be* told. You disclose to me all about him—where you've both been and what you've been doing."

"Indeed, aunt, there's nothing particular to disclose."

"Very well," said the old lady, firmly and coldly; "we'll let it go so, if you please, Keziah; but not another single syllable will I hear of what you've come to say."

Keziah knew the tone of old; knew that the resolution thus expressed could never be broken. In the silence that ensued, she asked herself whether it might not be better to tell—at least in part. Barnaby had strictly forbidden her to say where he was, or what he was doing; but she thought she could cook up the history, and deprive it of harm. If you, good reader, object to the word in such a matter, I can only say it was the one that ran through Miss Dawkes's mind.

"I will tell you, aunt," she said with well-acted frankness, as

she crossed the hearthrug, and ventured to place her grey bonnet in close proximity to the least deaf ear. "If we have kept our movements from you, it was only to spare you pain."

Mrs. Garston gave a derisive growl, and disposed herself to listen to the tale, which she perpetually interrupted.

"When Barnaby quitted London some months ago, Aunt Garston——"

"It's twelve months, if it's a day."

"Twelve months ago, he wandered about the country on foot, to save expense. But even that he found beyond his means, for roadside inns are expensive for a slender pocket——"

"That's according to what he ordered, Keziah."

"And at last he took a little tiny cottage near to a trout-stream, and there settled down, passing his time catching the fish, which he lived upon."

"*Did* he? Don't tell me!"

"But it was very dull for him; and the rent of even that poor little place was more than he could afford. He wrote to me, and asked if I would go down and join my income to his."

"What *is* his?"

"Ah, you may well ask it, Aunt Garston! It's nothing; for what he had been living upon was only a small remnant left after paying his creditors—a few pounds saved from the wreck."

"Paying his creditors! I didn't know they were paid."

"Some were, aunt."

"Oh, some! Go on."

"And I answered his appeal by going down; and we have been doing our best to exist upon my poor pittance, without troubling others to help us. But living is expensive everywhere, especially for a gentleman; and I—I, determined not to get into debt, forestalled my own income. Aunt Garston, for some years to come, I shall scarcely receive what will keep me in bread-and-butter. I mean it literally."

That this was true—the forestalling her income—the pain in her countenance betrayed: and Mrs. Garston saw it.

"More idiot you, Keziah! Barnaby won't thank you for it."

"Well, the money I borrowed on my income is gone, aunt;

and it is hard to starve. It is very hard to see *him* starve. I have come up to ask you to help us."

In the main, the above was correct; but had Mrs. Garston been able to take a bird's-eye view of the pretty cottage thus inhabited, and the luxurious style kept up in it in a small way, she had deemed Keziah a good story-teller.

"And pray why have you kept your residence there a secret?"

Ah, why! It was not Keziah's pleasure to tell. She gave as an excuse (partly true, again) what she would far rather have kept out of view.

"On account of Barnaby's creditors, aunt. It would not do for them to suspect where he was."

"And where was that?"

"Oh, we went about from place to place," answered Keziah carelessly.

"Did the cottage you were starving in go about with you?" was the sharp question that ensued.

It was of no use attempting to deceive Mrs. Garston. Keziah felt that she could have struck the keen grey eyes, that were looking her through and through.

"I only mean we went sometimes, aunt." Which was untrue, for they had never gone at all.

"Where is the cottage? How many more times am I to be put off?"

"It is in Wales." And Miss Dawkes spoke a very unpronounceable name.

"What? Can't you speak louder?" shrieked the old lady, supposing the defect lay in her hearing.

"It's impossible to pronounce it, aunt, plainer than that Barnaby and I never tried to. It is in a remote district of Wales; he chose it because of the cheapness."

"Is he there still?" asked Mrs. Garston, satisfied in a tart way with the explanation, and deceived for once.

"Yes, aunt, he is there, waiting until I can send him some relief. Aunt, dear aunt, you'll not refuse it! I don't petition for a large sum—just a hundred pounds, to enable him to go on for another year."

"Are you going back to him?"

"Not just yet. What do you say, aunt?"

"That I'll not give you a farthing for him."

Keziah's hard face took a tinge as green as her unbecoming bonnet-strings. "Aunt!"

"Not a farthing, Keziah Dawkes. If Barby chooses to come to town and see me, he'll hear a bit of my mind, and I'll then tell him what I will do and what I won't."

"But he could not come to town. His creditors might see him."

"Be you very sure of one thing, Mistress Keziah: if Barby wanted to run up for his own pleasure, it is not fear of his creditors would stop him; he'd contrive to dodge *them*. As you please. If he comes, and I see my way clear to giving him a trifle, I'll do it; but he'll not get a brass sixpence sent to him!"

And with that Keziah was forced to be content, for there might be no appeal from these stern decisions. She took luncheon, and sat with Mrs. Garston for the afternoon, but would not stay to dine, preferring to depart, that she might write a private letter to Barby.

"Why, child! Is it you!

A fairy-faced girl, with blue eyes and gleaming hair, came right into Keziah's way as she was passing through Mrs. Garston's gate. It was Belle Annesley, but the face appeared to be a little thin and worn.

"Have you been ill, Belle? You look delicate."

Not at first did Keziah receive any answer. The long absence of Captain Dawkes from London, the dearth of news of him, the uncertainty as to when they should be meeting again, had been wearing out this poor girl's heart, if not her frame. In the revulsion of joy at meeting Keziah, breath and speech alike momentarily left her

"Oh, Miss Dawkes! I am so glad to see you!"

Knowing what Keziah knew of Barnaby's former love—or pretended love—for this young girl, knowing what she knew of his present hopeful projects, she deemed it well, now that the first surprise had passed, to be rather chillingly reserved.

"Have you come back for good, Miss Dawkes?"

"Probably."

"Is—your—brother quite well?" stammered Belle, her face flushing painfully.

"I believe so. He was the last time I heard from him."

"Where is he?" Belle asked in her desperate courage.

"My dear Miss Annesley, he is here, there, and everywhere. Captain Dawkes was never famous for the certainty of his movements, as you perhaps remember. I do not suppose London will ever see him again. Good-bye; I stayed too long with Mrs. Garston, and am in a hurry."

She sailed swiftly away; and Belle Annesley drew aside from the garden-path, and her cheek faded to whiteness. The one cruel sentence, "I do not suppose London will ever see him again," seemed to strike life from her heart. All this time, months and months now, she had, so to say, lived on the remembrance of Barnaby Dawkes. Hers was no transient love. The capability to feel the passion in all its depths lay within her, and Captain Dawkes had done his best to call it forth. If it suited him to propose marriage to her—that is, to patch up his penniless state with the moderate fortune that would be hers—well and good; if it suited him to desert her—to ignore all that had passed, his love whispers and love vows, as mere pastime—well and good also. The girl and her feelings went for absolutely nothing in the estimation of Barnaby Dawkes, ex-officer and gentleman. There are very many more men besides him, to whom a girl's heart seems but a worthless plaything.

He was killing time elsewhere, absorbed in other plans and prospects. *She* lived on the love of the past. It served her still; nothing else in existence was half so sweet; she fondly hoped it would serve her, realized, in the future.

For this gallant captain and honourable man contrived to let Belle think he was still her slave—hers only, and for ever. It might be well (the captain mentally argued, looking ahead) to provide against contingencies; to have the young girl and her three hundred a-year to fall back upon if grander dreams failed. Two or three letters, carefully worded and posted from some strangely out-of-the-way places, had found their way to her, enjoining her not to forget him. Belle only too literally carried out the injunction. Any honourable man would have deemed

himself as irrevocably bound to Belle Annesley as though their engagement had been ratified by all the formalities that attend a betrothal in the Vaterland; and Belle so regarded it. Captain Dawkes simply intended to play fast and loose, as circumstances and self-interest dictated.

But the long delay, the absence of all certain news, perhaps some subtle instinct that on occasion mercifully precedes an avalanche of misery, had been making havoc with Belle's secret heart. Energy had gone; lively expectation had gone; and hope only broke out by fits and starts. All she thought was, that his affairs had fallen into a hopeless state, and she feared they might never be redeemed to allow of his coming out of exile to marry her. Ah, yes, the depressing words of Miss Dawkes were needlessly cruel; and she felt them so that she leaned for support against a tree.

"Why, Belle! What is it, my dear?"

It was Thomas Kage: who had come in at the gate and caught sight of her ere she was aware that any one was there: the poor pale cheek, the damp brow, the hopeless wretchedness of the whole countenance, the listless hands. Thomas Kage had nursed her on his knee when she was a child; he regarded her as one still, and was apt to address her like a tender elder brother.

With a start she leaped away and stood in the path, her face crimson, stammering words of ready excuse.

But Thomas Kage was not to be deceived. The sight of Keziah, to whom he had spoken in passing, enlightened him. There were two people in the world who had not been wholly blind to Captain Dawkes's love-making—Sarah Annesley, now the wife of Richard Dunn, and Mr. Kage; and both had watched the effect that hope deferred was taking on that poor young heart.

"I—I was going in to say how d'ye do to Mrs. Garston," she spoke, hastily. "But I don't think I'll go now; it is late."

She was passing onwards to the gate, but he caught her hand. Not thus would he let her escape, if he could say only half a word of comfort.

"Treat me as your elder brother, Belle. I'm sure I might

be your father, as far as feelings go, for in them I am old. Tell me what your trouble is."

"I—have no trouble," she answered in a flutter.

He had her hand in his, gazing on her downcast face and its trembling emotion. It was too much perhaps to expect her to speak openly to him, and yet he wished she would. For Mr. Kage had small confidence in Barnaby Dawkes, and it might be as well that this child should not go drifting blindly on without a rudder.

"Did Miss Dawkes give you any news of her brother?"

"No. I think she does not know where he is. She says he will not come back for a long time, if ever."

"Were I a young lady, Belle, I should call that good news," he said meaningly.

"You do not like Captain Dawkes, Mr. Kage; I have known that before," spoke Belle; and her hearer could not be deaf to the tone of resentment in the voice.

"You are wrong, my dear. Personally, I neither like nor dislike Captain Dawkes. I think this of him—that he is not worthy the love of an honest girl."

"Why is he not?" And the heaving chest proved what the question cost.

"He has no stability. And the love, instead of finding him a sure anchor, might get thrown back to its giver. *I* should forget Captain Dawkes, Belle; put him out of my memory altogether."

Belle burst into a forced laugh.

"This is all metaphor," she said, passing him; "we are forgetting common sense. I must wish you good-bye; mamma will wonder what is keeping me."

"Is your mamma better?"

"She is better one hour and worse the next. I shall say Thomas Kage inquired after her."

He stood a moment watching her flitting footsteps, and that peculiar and frequent action of hers—drawing her mantle closer to her chest. It was as if she always felt cold there.

Mrs. Garston, stick in hand, was standing at her drawing-room window when he entered. She turned her head, speaking sharply.

"Who was that you had in my garden? Belle Annesley?"

"Yes," he replied, thinking how keen the old eyes still were. "She was coming in to see you, but seemed to think it rather too late."

"What is the matter with that child, Thomas Kage?"

"The matter?"

"Now, don't pick up my words as if you were the parish echo. *I* can tell, if you can't—she's pining after that man, Barby Dawkes."

Had Mrs. Garston gravely asserted Miss Belle was pining after the man in the moon, he could not have been more surprised. How had she known it? A thought flashed over him that Mrs. Richard Dunn must have dropped a word, perhaps inadvertently.

"She has the yellow sickness, fretting after that flashy gentleman and his shiny whiskers. You need not stare, Thomas Kage; that's what we used to call it in my young days, when a girl took a false man into her heart and couldn't put him out of it again. What business had Barby Dawkes to make love to the girl?" As Mr. Kage could not say, he remained silent. "There are some fellows who would make love to a pump-handle. You may thank your stars that you are not one, for trouble mostly comes of it. Though you were touched once, Thomas Kage."

"I, ma'am! Touched!"

"Yes; you. After that heartless Kage girl, who went and made herself an old man's wife. Barby's a soldier, and has a soldier's impudence; but he might have spared a poor weak child like Belle Annesley."

Even at that distance of time the red colour flushed the brow of Thomas Kage at this abrupt allusion to his once dearest and most secret feelings. He rejoined carelessly; anything that came uppermost. "I met Miss Dawkes as I came in. She had been to see you."

"She had been to beg of me. It's the old story over again, Thomas; Barby's needs and Barby's debts. It will never be anything else whilst his life shall last."

"Do you know where he is now? Abroad, I suppose."

"He is at some place with a crack-jaw name. Keziah has

her answer. If Barby chooses to come up, he shall hear once for all what I mean to do for him. And he'll be fit to eat his fingers when he finds I have chosen another heir. And that's yourself, Thomas."

He did not appear to understand her.

"Myself! For what, ma'am?"

"For what? For that. The greater portion of my money will descend to you."

For a minute or two he seemed to be unable to take in the sense of the words. And then his whole face flushed with a kind of fear; his hands were lifted as if to ward off an evil.

"Never, never; Mrs. Garston, this must not be," he cried, in deep emotion. "Leave your money, I pray you, to any one rather than to me."

"What!" shrieked Mrs. Garston.

"I beg your pardon for my seeming ingratitude; I thank you truly for your good intention. But I could not take the money. I have no right to it, and would not inherit it."

They stood glaring on each other; at least that expression might be applied to the angry stare in her wide-open steel-grey eyes. His were as honest and good as ever, but unmistakably in earnest. She, in her pearl-grey satin dress and point-lace ruffles, was as stately and stern and grand a dame as ever painter depicted upon canvas. "I wonder what your mother would say to hear you, Thomas Kage."

"Were my mother to hear me—and perhaps she can," he reverently added,—"I think that she would approve of all I say. Dear, dear Mrs. Garston, believe that I am truly grateful, but you must not make me the heir to your wealth."

"Has it never occurred to you that I might make you my heir?"

"No—never. I think—I almost think that, if it had, I should have set conventionality at defiance and spoken first, telling you that it must not be."

"What is your objection?"

"That I have no right to it. Were you to leave me your money, and I could ever bring myself to enjoy it, I should feel always as though I were a thief—robbing Barnaby Dawkes."

"Barnaby Dawkes will not have it."

"You have other relatives. I am not one of them. I have no right to a shilling of it. And I think money should not be diverted from its legitimate course without grave cause; but I hope you will forgive me for saying so. During this past twelvemonth of my executorship to Mr. Canterbury's will, the papers have never been in my hand but the injustice of that will has struck upon me with fresh pain. I should not like to be made a second example of it."

"Look you well, Thomas Kage: if I take you at your word now, I take it for good and aye. Mind you that."

"Indeed I hope and expect it is what you will do. My dear mother did not pray for wealth for me," he added, in a half-whisper, an earnest radiance in his dark eyes; "least of all, wealth to which I had no right: rather than that, poverty. God has given me health and strength and brains to earn my own living, dear Mrs. Garston, and I should prefer to do it."

"Listen to a word first. I——"

"Dinner is served, madam," interposed the footman, opening the door inside.

Down came Mrs. Garston's stick in anger: she almost threw it at him. "Dinner may wait," she sharply said; and the man closed the door again.

"Are you listening to me, Thomas Kage?"

"Indeed I am."

"Very well. You have just said, perhaps your mother can hear us—and I don't know whether such a thought comes from heaven, or whether it doesn't—but at least, in the teeth of it, I wouldn't say aught but what's true as heaven's Gospel. Whoever may inherit the bulk of my fortune, *Barnaby Dawkes will not.* Neither will any other relative he possesses in the world. This decision I shall never revoke. If you refuse it, it will go to strangers. Now, then, consider. Take your time before you answer."

"I could not answer differently if I considered for ever," he gently replied. "Thank you very truly; but it must be as I say."

Possibly the gentleness disarmed her wrath. The stick was held quietly, and she put her hand on his arm to go in to dinner.

CHAPTER XX.

A PAINFUL INTERVIEW.

The twelvemonth went by, and Thomas Kage was ready to resign his executorship: some law details had thus protracted the settlement. The deed of release was forwarded for Mrs. Canterbury and the other parties to sign, and Mr. Kage also left London for the Rock: there was no legal necessity for his presence there, but he chose to spare the time for the journey. The railway was now extended to within two miles of the Rock; and an omnibus, as Mr. Kage was informed, plied between the terminus and Chilling. He was hastening to look for the conveyance when he ran across Mr. Carlton. That gentleman had long been disabused of his resentment against Mr. Kage on the subject of the executorship; for the lawyer, Norris, told him how craftily the appointment had been made.

"Don't get into that jolting omnibus," cried the warm-hearted Squire; "let me drive you in my pony-gig; there's room for you and your portmanteau too. I came to look after a parcel of books, and it has not arrived."

They were soon bowling along the road, Mr. Carlton full of gossip, as he loved to be. In relating some news, he mentioned the name of Captain Dawkes.

"Captain Dawkes!" exclaimed Mr. Kage. "What! is he here?" And Mr. Kage found, to his very great surprise, that Captain Dawkes was not only there at present, but had been there ever since, or nearly ever since, his first appearance in the place twelve months before. Just for a few moments he could scarcely believe it: that Captain Dawkes should remain at Chilling had never crossed the mind of Thomas Kage. A certain five pounds borrowed, had been intended to take him to some remote fishing-town on the Welsh coast; at least, the captain had said so.

"Do you know him?" questioned Mr. Carlton.

"A little. What is he doing here?"

"Fishing and sporting, *he* says. He does fish; but as to

being a sportsman, why, he is the greatest muff in the field you ever saw. The fact is, he is fonder of indoor sports than outdoor ones," continued Mr. Carlton, significantly. "I fancy he is likely to become a relation of yours."

"A relation of mine! In what way?"

"Rumour goes that he will marry Mrs. Canterbury."

"Ridiculous!" involuntarily burst from Thomas Kage.

"I suppose she does not think so. He is a good-looking man; very; and is heir to a large fortune, they say."

"Who says it?" quietly asked Mr. Kage.

"Who? I don't know. Every one; and he says it himself."

"How has he become intimate with Mrs. Canterbury?"

"Through living in the neighbourhood. He has been here a long time: ever since Mr. Canterbury's death, it seems to me."

"How and where does he live?" questioned Mr. Kage, who appeared to be absorbed, and not pleasantly, in what he heard.

"First of all, he was at the inn, and then he removed to a little furnished box there was to let, and had his sister down. He took it from month to month at starting, but now he seems to have it altogether."

"And is intimate, you say, at Mrs. Canterbury's?'

"Uncommonly intimate," was the answer of Mr. Carlton, who relished a dish of gossip more than anything. "Is at the Rock every day of his life. Folks say that Mrs. Kage went up there, and took her daughter to task about it; but Mrs. Canterbury is her own mistress, and will do as she likes."

"But surely Mrs. Kage is living at the Rock?"

"Not she."

"It was decided that she should, as Caro—as her daughter is so young."

"There was some such arrangement made, I remember. Mrs. Kage fished for it, and got it. But it did not last long—no one thought it would—and she went back to her own home at the cottage. Mrs. Kage assumed too much domestic control, and the young mistress of the Rock would not put up with it. Mrs. Canterbury visits a great deal, and is extremely popular in the county."

"In spite of the unjust will."

"She and Mrs. Kage had a great deal of blame at the time, but people seem to have forgotten it now."

"Ay," mused Thomas Kage, "this is the great obliterator of human actions, whether they be good or evil." He fell into a reverie as he spoke, and Mr. Carlton found he had the talking to himself; which was what he liked.

The hint just given troubled Mr. Kage, in spite of its utter improbability. Barnaby Dawkes, with his debts and his ill-living, and sweet Caroline Canterbury with her marvellous wealth! The thing was utterly absurd, painfully incongruous; but, nevertheless, Thomas Kage would have given a great deal to be made sure that nothing was in it, or ever would be. How was it, he wondered, that he had not heard until now of this lengthy sojourn of the ex-captain's at Chilling? His own correspondence with the place had been confined to a few business letters exchanged with the lawyer, Norris; for Mrs. Canterbury seemed to have taken umbrage at something or other on the day of the funeral, and had never written him one. Still, he thought he might have heard bits of gossip through Sarah Annesley, now Mrs. Richard Dunn. But Mrs. Dunn's chief friends, the Canterbury family, were all in Germany. Mrs. Rufort's health necessitated a change, her condition gave great anxiety to her husband and sisters; and Mr. Rufort got leave from the bishop of the diocese to substitute a clergyman in his place for twelve months; so that from them Sarah Dunn could hear no home news.

Another circumstance, not explained to Mr. Kage until long after, had also tended to keep the fact of Captain Dawkes's residence a secret from London ears. At first, he had been called Mr. Barnaby. That he had, in his desire for privacy, given this name, was more than probable: *he* said the people at the inn had taken it up from seeing it on a letter, and assumed it to be his surname. The public called him "Mr. Barnaby" still; and the captain made a joke of the same to the very few acquaintances he made down there, Mrs. Canterbury, her mother, and Mr. Carlton nearly comprising the whole. At any rate, whatever might have been the inducing causes, Mr. Kage had never known or suspected that Captain Dawkes was

at Chilling. Now that he knew it, his thoughts were busy. Mr. Carlton talked on, and he answered Yes and No at random, as one who hears not. When they reached the Rock, Mr. Carlton halted, and shouted for the keeper to open the lodge-gates. The wife came running out.

"I will walk up to the house," said Mr. Kage. "I should prefer it, for my legs are cramped. Thank you for bringing me."

He took out his portmanteau, and carried it inside the lodge, observing that he would despatch a servant for it. The woman took it in her hand to test its weight. "It's not heavy, sir. My boy can run up with it at once."

"Very well," replied Mr. Kage.

Close upon the house he heard the sound of voices at some little distance, and saw a gentleman playing with a child: now running with him, now tossing him, now carrying him on his shoulder. It was growing dusk, but Thomas Kage had no difficulty in recognizing Barnaby Dawkes; and the child was, beyond doubt, the young heir to the Rock.

Mrs. Canterbury was alone in the drawing-room; she had just come down attired for dinner. The article she had called a widow's cap was discarded; and with the expiration of the twelvemonth, a few days ago, also her heavy mourning. She wore a black-lace evening dress, with jet necklace and bracelets, and some jet beads in her sunny and luxuriant hair. Her emotion at sight of her visitor was vivid, and he could not fail to observe it.

"Oh, Thomas! this is indeed unexpected."

"I wrote you word last week I should be coming."

"But you did not say when. And I never thought you meant so soon."

"Am I too soon, Caroline?"

"Oh no, no; my surprise is all gladness. Have you come from London to-day?"

"I will answer as many questions as you like, when I have taken off some of this travelling dust; but I had better do it first, for it must be close upon your dinner-hour. You will like me to stay for that?"

"Stay for that! I hope you have come for longer by a

great deal. Remember how often you have promised to come to the Rock."

"I had intended to stay one night at it; but—— "

He did not finish the sentence. Caroline was looking at him with her wide-open blue eyes; dusk though it was, he could see their depths of beauty.

"What do you mean by 'but,' Thomas?"

"Well—yes; I will remain until to-morrow. How is Mrs. Kage? I thought she was living with you, Caroline."

"She comes in most days to dinner. I have long wanted to see you, Thomas; to thank you for acting for us as executor after all, in spite of your scruples."

A strange gravity came over his face with the introduction of the subject. His voice took a colder tone.

"If my declining to act would have changed the provisions of the will, I should have declined. But, in striving to perceive on which side my duty lay, that fact, above all others, forced itself upon my notice. The refusal would have brought no good to any one; only some trouble on you; and so I put aside my personal feelings, which were all against it, and went on with the task."

He left the room as he spoke, to be shown to the chamber assigned him; and, on descending again, found himself in the presence of both Mrs. Kage and Captain Dawkes.

Dinner was announced immediately. Captain Dawkes—we give him his title from habit—was advancing to Mrs. Canterbury; Mr. Kage stepped before him quietly, but with unmistakable decision. The gallant captain fell behind to Mrs. Kage, her fan, her essence-bottles, and her mincing affectation. Mrs. Canterbury, from the head of the table, asked Thomas Kage to take the opposite place. Captain Dawkes was on his best behaviour, subdued and gentlemanly. Mr. Kage caught, at odd moments, a glance of the eyes directed surreptitiously towards his quarter, and he knew that his appearance at Chilling was just about as welcome to their owner as snow in harvest.

"I hear you have been making a long stay in this neighbourhood, Captain Dawkes."

"Pretty well. I rather like it,"

After dinner the boy was brought in, little Thomas Canterbury. He was too gentle to be what is called a spoilt child, but his mother seemed wrapt up in him. Mr. Dawkes appeared equally fond of him. He took the boy on his knee, fed him with sweet things, kissed him, petted him, and kept him there until the ladies retired and carried him away with them. As Thomas Kage returned to his seat from closing the door, the captain took a five-pound note from his pocket-book and laid it on the table.

"Kage, I owe a thousand apologies for not having repaid you before. I am so glad to see you—and to relieve myself of the debt."

"You might have sent it," observed Mr. Kage.

"I know I might; but negligence is one of my failings. Thanks for the loan. You never had it repaid by that ancient relative of mine, I suppose?" he added, as an after-thought.

"I never mentioned the matter to her."

"Keziah writes me word that she is only waiting my presence in London to kiss and be friends. I thought she would come-to. For the past twelvemonth, you see, I have got along without asking help from her, and that has put her in good-humour."

"But how have you been able to get along?"

"I had a windfall from a brother-officer. A fellow who owed me a lot of money, and came down like a brick with it. I had given it up for a bad job; but he suddenly came into a fortune, and paid up his debts."

This was true. But Captain Dawkes did not think it necessary to add that the "windfall" arose from a former bet at gambling; or that its payment had enabled him to make for a time a show at Chilling, and pass off for a tolerably rich man; or that Keziah's means had been sacrificed bit by bit to keep the show up.

"Do you see any signs of decay?"

"Decay in what?" asked Mr. Kage

"In the deaf old party. It's an awful shame of her to live so long, keeping a fellow out of his own!"

"Are you sure that Mrs. Garston's death would benefit you?"

"Yes. To the extent of the greater portion of her fortune."

"I think you are mistaken, Dawkes."

"No, I am not," said the captain, smacking his lips as he put down his glass. "Capital wine this of old Canterbury's! You don't seem to appreciate it, Kage."

"A short time ago, Mrs. Garston began talking to me about her will," resumed Mr. Kage, passing over in silence the remark on the wine. "I did not ask her for it: I didn't care to hear about it, for it was nothing to me. But she then said as solemnly as it is well possible for a woman to speak, that you would *not* inherit her money. If I tell you this, Dawkes, it is in kindness—that you may not deceive yourself with false hopes."

"Perhaps you imagine that *you* will inherit it?" rejoined the captain, with a scarcely-suppressed sneer.

"I am sure that I shall not," was the quiet answer. "Mrs. Garston will bequeath her money without reference to me. Rely upon one thing, however, Dawkes: that you will not have it any more than I shall. Were I not persuaded of the positive truth of this, I would not have mentioned it to you."

"Were I not persuaded of the positive truth that I *shall* have it, I should not be living at my ease as I am," was the retort. "She may have changed her mind since telling you this, or perhaps only said it in momentary pique; but I do know for a certainty, through Keziah, that Mrs. Garston will do right, and make me her heir."

The assertion was utterly devoid of truth, though the captain's bold face was a marvel of candour as he delivered it. The fact was, it suited him to pass off at Chilling for a man whose large expectations could not be imperilled. Mr. Kage silently supposed there might be some inadvertent misconception on Keziah's part, or that her hopes deceived her.

"You do not ask after your little friend, Belle Annesley, Dawkes."

"Hope she's well," was the careless comment. "Had nearly forgotten her. Nice little girl enough. Wonder when she's going to get married?"

It was not Thomas Kage's province to tell Captain Dawkes he ought to be the bridegroom. In point of fact, he did not know how much or how little had passed between the two.

Belle might have given her heart without due inducement—a not entirely uncommon case.

"Yes, she is a very nice girl," he said, warmly. "Something seems to ail her, Dawkes. All her childish ways are put aside; and she is as staid as she was once light-mannered. Sad, in fact."

"Sad, is she? It's through living with that wearying old mother. How's town looking?" he added, deliberately passing away from the subject. And Mr. Kage was content to let it pass. They rose from table together, and went into the drawing-room.

It was not altogether a merry evening. Thomas Kage was silent and thoughtful; the ex-captain like one under some constraint. Mrs. Kage shot keen glances, and not always pleasant ones, at the assemblage generally, from over the top of her smelling-salts. Calling Thomas to her, she made room for him on the sofa near the fire. A large one was kept up every night when Mrs. Kage was there.

"You have not told me how I am looking," she said, tapping him playfully with her fan.

Had Thomas Kage told, and truly, he would have said, very ill. Of all battered, worn-out old creatures, the late Lord Gunse's daughter was the worst. Her head nodded involuntarily. Mrs. Garston, over twenty years her senior, looked younger. In this past twelvemonth she seemed to have aged ten years.

"I hope you feel well, Mrs. Kage," was all he could bring himself to say to the appeal.

"Perfectly charming. Don't I look so? When Fry settled this white feather in to-day,"—pointing to the top of her withered old head,—"she said it became me in a wonderful manner, making quite a girl of me. Some of us never grow old, you know. Thomas, I don't like that man."

The transition rather startled him. Her simpering face of affectation had changed to a sharp one, her self-sufficient voice to a dissatisfied whisper behind her fan; her eyes cast forth gleams of rage at Captain Dawkes, who stood for the moment at the far-end of the room with his back to them.

"He makes himself too much at home here. I tell Caroline so, but she does not see it. Sometimes I think he must have

designs on Caroline and her money. And that, you know dear Thomas, would be undesirable."

"Entirely so."

"I wish he'd go away, and leave the place. He doesn't like me, and I don't like him. He is heir to Mrs. Garston's wealth, poor deaf old object!—but still I don't like the impolite man. Do you know much of him?"

Certainly Thomas Kage did not know much good of him, had he chosen to say so.

"I took a dislike to his rolling black eyes; it was the first day, when he as good as told me I'd paint on. I do assure you, Thomas, my complexion is quite natural."

Thomas Kage bit his lip to hide a smile, and the *tête-à-tête* was broken by the gallant captain himself, who came up too closely to be talked of.

Both the guests left early. Late hours were getting to be barred luxuries to Mrs. Kage; and the captain gave her his arm to the little close carriage that brought and took her, taking his own departure at the same time. It was scarcely ten o'clock when Mrs. Canterbury and her cousin were left alone. She caused the chess-table to be brought forward, and set out the men.

"You will play, Thomas, will you not?'

He drew his chair up, and they commenced the game. In five minutes Mrs. Canterbury had checkmated him. Then he began to put the pieces up.

"But will you not play again?" she asked.

"Not to-night. My thoughts are elsewhere."

He finished his employment, pushed the table back, and dropped into a musing attitude, his elbow on the arm of his chair. Mrs. Canterbury glanced at him as she played with the trinkets that were hanging from her chain. Her own spirits throughout the night had been wonderfully high.

"Is anything the matter, Thomas? You have been as solemn as a judge all the evening."

"Is it true that you are likely to marry Dawkes?" was his abrupt rejoinder.

"My goodness! what put that in your head?"

"Is it true, Caroline?" he more sadly repeated

"No, it is not true," she emphatically said. "How came you to think of such a thing?"

"A hint of it was whispered to me since I came down here."

"Oh, then, I know—it was by mamma," she slightingly said, her lip curling.

"No, Caroline. It was by a stranger."

"I am surprised at your taking it up seriously, Thomas; there's not a shade of truth in it. But why cannot people keep their mischief-making tongues within bounds?"

"It was not prudent, Caroline, to allow a man, of whom you know nothing, to become so intimate here. In the first place, you are too young for it."

"No, not too young in position. I am mistress of the Rock, and a widow; I have a child three years old. You were always ultra-crotchety, Thomas."

"Let me tell you a little of what I know of Dawkes," was his calm rejoinder. "He has been a wild, gay man, up to his ears in debt and embarrassment; has lived in little else for years past. Mrs. Garston has come to his relief on occasion, but it has not seemed to serve him much. When he came to this neighbourhood, it was to be safe from his creditors."

"Few men have been exempt from embarrassment at some time or other of their lives," observed Mrs. Canterbury. "Captain Dawkes's having been in debt ought not to tell against him, now he is free from it."

"How do you know he is free from it?"

"Of course he is. He lives here openly, and seems to have plenty of money."

"He may have paid his debts in part; he may have some ready-money to go on with; I do not know that it is not so, and you do not know that it is. But I do know that plenty of money he cannot have. It is only a very short time ago that his sister Keziah—I mention this in strict confidence, Caroline—applied to Mrs. Garston for help for him."

"And if she did—it would be like asking for his own. He will inherit Mrs. Garston's fortune."

In the most earnest words he could use, Thomas Kage assured Mrs. Canterbury that Captain Dawkes would *not*

inherit it; that his own expectation on the point would inevitably prove a fallacy. Knowing the old lady so thoroughly, he was convinced, beyond danger of mistake, that Captain Dawkes would never be her heir after the words she had spoken, and he deemed himself justified in saying as much to Mrs. Canterbury.

"I'm sure he may be cut off with a shilling for aught I care," was Mrs. Canterbury's answer. "Captain Dawkes and his prospects are nothing to me, Thomas."

"I thought it strange if he could be. But reflect for one moment, Caroline—to such a man as this, with his, at best, uncertain future, what a temptation a fortune like yours must hold out! The——"

"What a shame it is people can't mind their own business!" interrupted Mrs. Canterbury. "They interfere with me in the most unwarrantable manner. They say I visit too much, and they say I left off my ugly widow's caps too soon—I wore them nearly twelve months, and they were spoiling my hair. And now they have been talking to you about Captain Dawkes."

"I was about to observe that the tastes and pursuits of Captain Dawkes—I have seen something of them—are not calculated to bring happiness to a wife, Caroline." She smiled; a bright laughing smile. Mr. Kage was vexed; he thought it a derisive one. "Caroline, I speak for your sake only—for your happiness."

"Then you really do care for my happiness?"

"I have never cared for any one's so much in life. You knew it once, Caroline."

Mrs. Canterbury had risen to stand on the hearthrug before the large pier-glass, and the red fire-glow deepened the blushes on her cheeks. Or had they deepened themselves? Anyway, they were rich and beautiful. Thomas Kage thought so as he stood near her; far too innocent and beautiful to be thrown away on Barnaby Dawkes.

"I *thought* it once," she hesitatingly said, "until——"

"Until when?"

"Until I married. But it was all over then."

"Not so. I am anxious for your happiness still, and I wish you would let me try and guide you to it."

"How would you begin?" she merrily said.

"First of all, you should break off the intimacy with Dawkes. How was it brought about?" he interrupted himself to ask.

"It began by his taking a fancy for my boy. He made acquaintance with him and his nurse in their walks, and the child grew so attached to him, nothing was ever like it. How could I help being civil to one who is so fond of my child?"

"Let there be truth between us, Caroline," he interrupted, in a pained tone.

"I am telling you truth; I will tell you all. I care nothing for Captain Dawkes, and I only like him because he loves the boy. But he has grown to like me in a different way," she added; "and last week he asked me to become his wife."

"What was your answer?"

"My answer! It was such that I do not think Captain Dawkes will ever venture to speak to me in that manner again. He begged my pardon humbly for his mistake. It was then that he told me—but I had heard him say it before—that he would to a certainty inherit Mrs. Garston's fortune."

"This having been your answer, how is it that he is still intimate here?"

"He begged me to bury what had passed in oblivion, to pardon him for it, to let it die out of my remembrance as a thing that had never had place, and to allow him to continue his friendship with the Rock. It would grieve him painfully, almost kill him, to part with the boy, he said. I told him it was so entirely a matter of indifference to me, that he might continue to come here on occasion if he chose."

"Then you do not love him, Caroline?"

"No: it is not to him that my love is given.

"That tone, Caroline, would almost imply that it is given elsewhere. Is it so?"

She had spoken incautiously; and the flush of crimson rising in her face was so vivid that she turned it from him. Thomas Kage took her hand and held it between his.

"Would you have me go through life alone?" she sadly asked. "Why should I not marry again? Some mothers call girls at my age too young for wives. I am not three-and-twenty."

"My dear, I hope you will marry again; my only anxiety is that you should marry for happiness. What is the matter?"

Mrs. Canterbury had burst into tears.

"It is such a lonely life," she whispered; "it has been so lonely all along. I married,—you know about it, that I did not care for him,—and I found I had grasped the shadow and lost the substance. I tried to carry it off before others and be gay; but there was the aching void ever in my heart. Since I have been free, it has been the same: no real happiness; nothing but a yearning after what I have not. Sometimes hope springs up and pictures a bright future; but it flies away again. I have never," she continued, raising her eyes for a moment, "breathed aught of these my feelings to man or woman: I could not to any one but you."

"Caroline, you are indulging a love-dream! Who is its object?"

She was trembling excessively: he could feel that, as he held her hand, which she had not attempted to remove. Alone with him in that quiet evening hour, her heart full of romance and sentiment, Caroline Canterbury may be forgiven if she betrayed herself. Though she had heartlessly rejected Thomas Kage to marry a rich man, she had loved him passionately then, and she loved him passionately still.

"Who is it, Caroline?"

"Do not ask me."

"Who is it, Caroline?"

"*Need* you ask me?"

No, he need not; for in that same moment the scales fell from his own eyes. Her agitated tone, her downcast look, told him what he had certainly not had his thoughts pointed to.

He dropped her hand, and went and leaned his own elbow on the mantelpiece, with a flush as rosy as hers. Thomas Kage was no coxcomb—never a truer-hearted man than he in the world. His first feeling was surprise; his second self-blame for having himself provoked the avowal. But that Caroline Canterbury should love him still, after her deliberate rejection of him to marry another, after all this lapse of years, and the time she was a wife, never once entered his mind. Rather

would he have expected her to avow a love for the greatest stranger—for this man Dawkes, even—than for him.

"Caroline," he whispered, breaking a long silence, "was *this* your dream?"

Vexed at having betrayed so much, her sobs increased hysterically. He waited until she grew calm.

"It cannot be," he continued, in agitation. "Whether it might have been, whether the old feelings might have been renewed between us, I have never allowed myself to ask. There is an insuperable barrier."

"In my having left you to marry Mr. Canterbury?"

"Mr. Canterbury is gone and has left you free. The barrier lies in his unjust will."

"I do not understand you," she faintly said.

Thought after thought came chasing each other through his mind: some of them Utopian, perhaps; but, as she used herself to tell him, that was in his nature.

"Our former attachment was known to some people—or, at least, suspected," he remarked, in low tones. "Were I to make you my wife now, who but would say that will was a work of complicity planned between us?—the money bequeathed to you, and I the executor! Caroline, were you as dear to me as formerly, as perhaps you might become again, I would die of heart-break rather than marry your money, and so sacrifice my good name."

Her face and lips had turned white; her heart felt turning to stone within her. Mr. Kage resumed.

"In my mind there has always been a sort of fear connected with the will. When it flashes into my memory suddenly, as events will flash, I seem to shrink with dread. It is a strange feeling, one that I have never been able to account for. Caroline, rather than be connected with that will, in the way of benefit to myself, I would fly the kingdom."

She had turned her face to look at him: it expressed a sort of puzzled wonder.

"Yes, I see how inexplicable this must sound to you. But the aversion to the will, the dread of it, lies sure and fast within me. Mr. Canterbury bequeathed me, as you may be aware, one hundred pounds for my trouble as executor. What little

expense it entailed upon me, I honestly repaid myself; and the rest of the sum I have sent to one of our most necessitous hospitals. I only mention this to prove to you how impossible it is that I could, under any circumstances, consent to reap benefit from that unjust will."

"Answer me one thing," she rejoined, in agitation. "When you urged me so strongly to induce Mr. Canterbury to make a more equitable will, was this—this—in your thoughts?—that perhaps, sometimes, as—as he was an old man, and I almost sure to be left free when still young—that this question of to-night might arise between us?"

"No," he earnestly answered. "I spoke alone in the interests of justice. I wished you to be just in the eyes of men; to endeavour to be so in the sight of God. From the day of your marriage with Mr. Canterbury, I have never thought of you but as lost to me; and I schooled my heart to bear it."

Recollection, remorse, grief, were telling upon her. She shook as she stood, and turned to lean upon something by which to steady herself. He could but walk across the rug to support her. But it was done without the smallest tenderness.

"I suffered then as you are suffering now," he whispered.

"Let me make it up to you," she returned, heeding little what she said in her despair—"let us make it up to each other. You do care for me still—I have riches, I have my love. Oh, Thomas, let me make it up to you!"

"Don't you see it is those riches that make it impossible? Caroline, do not tempt me. It can never be."

"I will give up my riches; and think it no sacrifice."

"You cannot give them up. The greater portion are held in trust for your son."

Yes, she saw it; quitting his side to lean against the mantelpiece, she saw it. The riches must cling to her as some foul thing that could never be shaken off. The gold, so coveted and deceitfully planned for, was already turning to bitterness in her mouth, like the apples of Sodom.

"Then you reject me?" she faintly said.

"As a wife; I have no other alternative. But, Caroline, we can be dear to each other still—as brother and sister.'

"Brother and sister! brother and sister!" she wailed. "That is not a tie to satisfy the void of an aching heart."

"Caroline, my darling sister, you must school your heart," he urged in his faithfulness. "*I* had to do it. I have to do it still. Why! do you think this, now passing between us, is not bringing me the most exquisite pain?" he broke off, giving way for a single moment to his emotion. "But for the barrier that Fate has raised up around you, I should take you to my breast with rapture, now as we stand here, thanking God that sunshine had come into my life at last. It has been cold and bleak enough without you, all these years."

The jet necklace on her white neck heaved and fell. But for the utmost control, but for the reticence that never forsakes a modest, right-minded woman, she had fallen on his breast then.

"As brother and sister," repeated Mr. Kage, retaining his distance; but he was quite sure of himself. "Any warmer feeling, any more sacred tie between us is impossible. Be composed, Caroline; be yourself."

"Yes, I will be myself," she answered, pride coming to her aid. "Farewell, Thomas."

She was walking rapidly to the door to seek her chamber. Thomas Kage opened it for her, and held out his hand as though nothing had happened. "Good night, Caroline. To-morrow we will meet as usual, and forget all this. I shall have to leave you very soon after breakfast."

In attempting to return his good night, a smothered sob of anguish escaped her. His own heart echoed it as he closed the door and went back to the fire for some few minutes. The rejection he had had to give was as painful as any ever spoken by man.

And poor Mrs. Canterbury? As she tossed on her sleepless pillow, recognizing at last the worth, the value of the man she had once rejected, retribution seemed to have laid hold of her with its piercing fangs. Throughout the live-long night she bewailed the possession of the vast riches that were not justly hers. Fatal, worthless, molten riches; as they seemed to be in her eyes now. They had brought the reproach of the world in their train; they had heaped this present misery and mortifi-

cation on her head; they had thrown up an impassable gulf against him who had alone made her day-dream.

Pretty well, all this. But Mrs. Canterbury—looking upon them in that bitter moment as a sort of evil gift, a fatality—caught herself wondering what else of ill they might bring in the future.

CHAPTER XXI.

CAPTAIN DAWKES IN TOWN.

Face to face with each other—she bolt upright in her richest brocaded silk, on the stiffest of her drawing-room sofas, he tilted forward from a small chair—sat Mrs. Garston and Captain Dawkes. Their faces nearly met. It was a momentous interview; and the captain always had the idea that she could not hear one word in ten unless he were within an inch of her.

The year had grown older by a week only since Thomas Kage's visit to Chilling. Captain Dawkes, weighing plans and projects, ways and means, had at length brought himself to town, braving the danger that might accrue if his creditors caught sight of him. But he had learnt caution of old. His large dark eyes wore a gloomy light as they gazed into the cold grey ones of Mrs. Garston. She had been telling him, in terms not to be misunderstood, that the inheritor of her money would not be himself.

"You never ought to have looked for it, Barby Dawkes; never. But I don't blame *you* for doing so, so much as I do those who flattered you up that it would be yours. Keziah, to wit. I told her, when she was last here bothering me, that if you would come and see me you should hear what I would and would not do."

"And I have come, ma'am."

"You've taken your time about it," was the old lady's retort. "But that was your business, not mine. And now I will fulfil my part of the bargain. First of all, though—is it true what Keziah tells me: that she has sunk some of her small capital for you?"

"That is true."

"And more shame for you to allow it, Barnaby Dawkes! What?—no other means? Most men would have gone and broke stones in the road before they'd have robbed a sister."

"I live in hopes to repay her," said Barnaby.

"Do you!" spoke Mrs. Garston, with irony. "What do you suppose Keziah said to me the other day?"

"I can't imagine. She says queer things on occasion."

"That if you were a married man you would be as steady as old Time."

"And so I should be," rejoined Barnaby, eagerly. "I should be as steady and saving as you are, Aunt Garston."

She did not speak at once. Her bright grey eyes were gazing into his, as though she sought to know whether trust might be placed in his words.

"If I were fortunate enough to get married—that is, if my circumstances allowed me to do so—it would be the turning-point in my life," he impressively said. "My future safeguard."

"Barnaby Dawkes, I think it might be."

To hear even this concession from one who never spoke of him, or to him, but in terms of the most utter disparagement, rather surprised the captain, and very much gratified him.

"It is true, Aunt Garston, on my honour. Let me get the chance of becoming a married man, and you would see how good a member of society I should make. You might safely leave your fortune to me then, without fear that it would ever be wasted."

"What do you say?" she asked, bending her best ear. And Captain Dawkes repeated his words.

"Listen, Barnaby. I told you just now, as plainly as I could speak, that the bulk of my fortune would not go to you. Take you heed of that once for all: *it never will.* When my will is opened, after my death, you will find two hundred pounds a-year secured to you; and, besides that, a sum of five hundred pounds down, which you may use to pay your debts with."

If ever a blank look settled on man's face, it did on that of Captain Dawkes. "You cannot *mean* it, Mrs. Garston," he said, after a pause.

"It is all you will inherit from me, Barnaby," was the cold,

resolute rejoinder. "I shall never make it another shilling—except on one condition."

"What's that?" he gloomily asked.

"That you marry. Now don't you mistake me, and think I want to urge you into marriage," added Mrs. Garston, rapping her stick violently. "I should be sorry to do it by the person dearest and nearest to me in the world. People should look out for themselves in such serious matters, and then nobody else is responsible for consequences."

"The devil take Keziah!" was the captain's mental comment. "She must have been letting loose that tongue of hers."

"You fell in love with a girl in London, Barnaby; *made* love to her, that is. Considering that you are worthless in conduct, and hampered by debt, it was three-parts a swindle to have done it."

"But I—don't know what you mean, ma'am," replied the surprised captain. "How came you to hear such a thing of me? It has no foundation whatever."

"How I came to hear it is nothing to you. Perhaps I saw it for myself. I can see one thing, Barby Dawkes—that the foolish child is pining her heart away for you."

"But—who is it, Aunt Garston?"

He knew quite well, and there was an untrue ring in his voice as he asked it. Down came Mrs. Garston's stick, ominously near his foot.

"It is Belle Annesley. How dare you pretend ignorance to me, sir! Do you suppose it will serve you?"

His face grew a little hot. He would not acknowledge to this: he might not venture, in the teeth of her insistency, to deny it. "It was quite a mistake," he lamely muttered; "quite a mistake."

"If it's the want of money that keeps you from marrying her, I'll remedy that," said Mrs. Garston. "She will inherit three hundred a-year from her mother; I'll settle on you both jointly, and your children after you, seven hundred more; which will make an annual income of one thousand pounds. If you can't think that enough, you deserve to die in the workhouse. Over and above, I will pay your debts, Barby, on the wedding-day."

Some twelve months before, Barby Dawkes would have leaped at this offer as a boon. Now, in the teeth of greater and grander visions, it only perplexed him. He stroked his purple moustache.

"But—suppose, Aunt Garston, that I were to decline the marriage; that I were—in short—to find it would not suit either myself or the young lady—what then?"

"What then? Nothing. *I* don't urge it; I've said so. If a word from me would marry the pair of you, I wouldn't speak it. The decision lies with you and her. But if you are both set on it, and you intend to be what you ought to be to her, you shall not be hindered for want of means."

"You are very kind," muttered Barnaby. "What I wished to ask was—about money-matters in regard to myself, if I don't marry her."

"Were you deaf?" roared out Mrs. Garston. "Didn't I tell you that, not married, you'd get two hundred a-year at my death? Where's the use of my repeating things?"

"And—until your death?" he ventured to urge. "I am in embarrassment now."

"Until my death I'll allow you one hundred a-year, Barnaby Dawkes. Not another penny, though it were to save you from hanging."

There ensued a silence. To attempt to contradict Mrs. Garston never brought forth good fruit; as Barnaby knew. He saw another thing—that what she had said now would be irrevocable for life. It was the first time she had explicitly stated her intentions, and he knew they would be abiding.

"Would you make me the same offer, Aunt Garston, if I married some one else?"

"If you did what?"

"Married another lady; not Belle Annesley?"

The question put Mrs. Garston into such a rage that he was fain to withdraw it, saying she had comprehended him wrongly.

"I hope I did. But I don't think it. If you could go and marry another, after what you've led that child to expect, you might look for Heaven's vengeance to come down upon you. She'd be well quit of a man who could act so, but it would break her heart. You may be a villain, Barnaby Dawkes; but

I would advise you to keep it to yourself in my hearing. And that's all I have to say."

Barnaby Dawkes pushed his chair back, and fell into thought. A minute or two, and he lifted his head again.

"Marriage is a serious matter, Mrs. Garston; few of us, I imagine, like to enter upon it rashly. I must take a week or two for consideration."

"That's the most sensible thing you've said this evening, Barby Dawkes."

"And go back to Wales whilst I reflect; I dare not stay in London. You will help me, Aunt Garston? I cannot live upon air."

Mrs. Garston growled. Air was certainly not very substantial to live upon.

"I'll give you fifty pounds."

"Thank you. If you would only make it a hundred!"

"Now don't you try my patience too much. What I've said I mean, Barby. Will you take some dinner?"

"Thank you. With immense pleasure."

"Then just ring that bell to let them know I'm ready for it. I'd have left out the 'immense,' if I had been you."

When dinner was announced, the captain gallantly held out his arm. Mrs. Garston put it aside with her stick and stalked on, leaving him to follow.

"I go in by myself when Thomas Kage is not here."

"Crush him for a snake in the grass!" mentally uttered the rejected captain. "*He'll* get the bulk of the money, the smooth reptile."

To partake of Mrs. Garston's excellent dinner was one thing; to remain the whole evening with her was another; and Captain Dawkes rose to leave with the table-cloth, making an excuse that he had a pressing engagement.

"I thought you were afraid of meeting some sheriff's officers in the streets?" spoke the old lady in her open manner.

"There's not so much danger, ma'am, after dark."

Nevertheless, when the captain reached the gate, he looked cautiously up the road and down the road, pulling his coat-collar high about his ears.

Little did Belle Annesley, enshrined within the safety of her

mother's home so short a distance away, dream of the joy that the hour had in store for her. Mrs. Annesley, whose health was failing much, spent the greater portion of her time in her own chamber. On this day she had been downstairs for a few hours, but went up again, and to rest, at dusk; so that Belle was alone.

Time had been when Mrs. Annesley would have scrupled to leave her so much without a companion, but Belle's random days were over: never a lady in the land more staid, tranquil, home-sick than she now. Mrs. Lowther and Mrs. Richard Dunn were always more than glad to see her; but she did not go to either very often. Sometimes they ran in to sit with her.

Seated at work by the light of the lamp, her fingers slow and listless, her countenance hopelessly sad, was she. But she was not less pretty than of old. The face was young and fair; the blue ribbons—she cared for no other colour—were still adorning the fine light hair with its golden tinge. Her dress this evening was a white muslin, and altogether she looked infinitely charming.

"That's Sarah Dunn," she softly said to herself, as a ring was heard. "I thought she would be coming in."

"Captain Dawkes, miss," announced the servant.

One moment's gaze, as though she had not heard, and then Belle dropped her work, and rose. Her pulses were tingling, her heart bounding, her face turning white as death. She felt sick with the rush of joy, her hands and frame were alike trembling; for a moment sight left her, and she grasped the table for support.

Standing before her, when they were shut in alone, Captain Dawkes, experienced man that he was, read the signs, read the love. It brought him pleasure; for if his heart had a preference, it was for this girl. He took her hands in his, he bent his face with a soft whisper.

"You are glad to see me, Belle?"

Glad! An instant's struggle to maintain her calmness, as a well-trained young lady should, and then poor Belle gave way. She burst into tears, and Captain Dawkes gathered the pretty face to his shoulder. He scrupled not to kiss it, and kiss it

again; although he had as much intention of marrying her as he had of marrying you.

"It has been so long—so long!" murmured Belle, ashamed of her emotion, and sitting down to the work. "I thought you were never coming again."

"As did I," responded the captain, taking a chair in front of her. "Things have been going cross and contrary, my little one."

"Are they straight now?"

"Anything but that. If that wicked old party would only do her duty by me, I should have been all right long ago. I've just come away from her; been undergoing the penalty of dining with the mummy."

"And have you come to London to remain, Barnaby?"

"Only until to-morrow."

Her face fell sadly. He drew his chair a trifle nearer.

"You know, my pretty one, where I would be if I could—where my heart is. But if the Fates are unpropitious, what's to be done?"

"It must be very dull for you, away from everybody."

"A frightful exile."

"I am dull, too," she added, in a plaintive tone. "Mamma is always ill; Sarah has her own home now, and her baby; and I am mostly alone."

"What's the matter with Mrs. Annesley?"

"The doctors call it a break-up of the constitution. She is weak and spiritless. How do you manage to amuse yourself, Barnaby?"

"Fishing," answered the captain, shortly. "That and bemoaning my hard fate fill up the time."

"Have you many friends down there?"

"Friends! There? You never saw such a miserable, lonely, out-of-the-world place as it is, Belle."

The colour in the fair cheeks was going and coming; the fingers, plying the needle, began to tremble again. Belle's voice was faint as she spoke:

"Do you know what I heard? I want to tell you."

"Tell away, child. What did you hear?"

"That you were going to be married."

"Married! I!" And the captain acted well his perfect astonishment.

"I thought it could not be true. Forgive me for repeating it, Barnaby."

"Why, you silly child, *you* might have known it was not."

The words and the reassurance caused her whole heart to thrill with rapture. Oh, it was good to have undergone the past doubt and suffering for *this* relief! The dark days gone by were as nothing now. One shy glance at him from the loving pretty blue eyes, and Belle sat on in silence. A question actually crossed Captain Dawkes's mind for the moment—should he accept the offer made by Mrs. Garston, and take this girl to his heart as his wife? He cared for her more than he could ever care for any other. The next minute he almost laughed at himself. A thousand a-year and domestic bliss would not suit Barnaby Dawkes.

"What work is that you are so busy over, my fairy?"

"One of mamma's new handkerchiefs; I am hemming them for her," was the simple answer.

"Wish I had some one to hem mine!"

Belle smiled and glanced at him. In her heart she was feeling ten years younger. Captain Dawkes suddenly bent down, and kissed the hand that held the cambric.

"Halloa! who's this, I wonder?"

A visitor's step in the hall called forth the exclamation. Captain Dawkes was in the act of pushing his chair back to a respectable distance, when Mrs. Richard Dunn entered, in a pink-silk hood. Belle's face wore some conscious confusion; and Mrs. Dunn thought she must have interrupted a love-scene.

And Captain Dawkes, who did not particularly like Mrs. Richard Dunn, took up his hat and went forth, braving the danger from the sheriff's officers.

CHAPTER XXII.

PLAYING FOR HIGH STAKES.

In her own favourite room at the Rock, with its soft carpet of many colours, its charming furniture, its rare and costly surroundings, sat Mrs. Canterbury. The French window was opened to the ground, and the gay autumn flowers were wafting in their sweetest perfume. On the lawn beyond, the young heir to the Rock was sporting with his attentive friend, Captain Dawkes. The blue sky was overhead, the warm sunshine shed delight around. Pleasant things, all; but to Caroline Canterbury they seemed as dismal as a dark night. For her the world had lost its charm.

She sat in a low chair drawn back from the window, dressed for gaiety. It was afternoon yet, but she had a drive of ten miles to keep a dinner engagement, and the carriage to convey her was already coming round. It was only yesterday that Thomas Kage had left her after his brief visit, and yet it seemed to her that she had since lived a lifetime.

None, save herself, might know what fond dreams she had been indulging since the death of Mr. Canterbury; dreams of which Thomas Kage was the hero. There was no sin in doing it, as she would softly repeat over and over to herself; she was as free as air, and there could be no sin. None, save herself, could ever know or conceive what awful pain, mortification, and repentance his rejection inflicted on her. Bright was she to look at in her gala-robes; the black-net dress with its white-satin ribbons, than which nothing could be more attractive to the eye, and the diamonds gleaming in the hair where the widow's cap so recently had been; but the heart within was encased in sackcloth and ashes. What were all the jewels and gauds of the world to her, since she might not enjoy them?

She could not enjoy them alone. Whatever might have been Caroline Kage's greed of gain, one great need was implanted in her by nature—that of companionship. It might be, that until this moment she never knew the full extent of her love

for Thomas Kage: we rarely do find the true value of a thing until we lose it. He was lost to her for ever. The money for which she had sold herself was hers; but it had deprived her of Thomas Kage. In that moment it seemed that the beautiful things in the room, the Rock itself, the lands she looked out upon, had all grown hateful to her. One balm amidst it alone remained, and that was her little boy. Her love for him approached idolatry.

When she and Mr. Kage had met at breakfast, the morning after that painful and decisive interview took place, no allusion to it was made by either of them. Caroline chose to have the child at the breakfast-table, perhaps as a break to what might otherwise have been an embarrassing meal. But Mr. Kage, for his part, seemed to retain no remembrance of it; he was calm, kind, self-contained in manner as usual; ready of speech, talking of indifferent things, and still very solicitous for her comfort and welfare. They spoke of business matters before his departure; his closed executorship, and the future of the child, to whom he was trustee. And this morning Caroline had received a letter from him, which must have been written, she thought, on his journey to town. It concluded as follows:—

"Your life at the Rock must indeed be very lonely. When you alluded to it this morning, I felt the fact just as forcibly as you. I had thought your mother lived with you. You do not please to have her, you say; but is there no one else that you could have? I do not like to suggest one of the Miss Canterburys, say Millicent; but she would be very suitable, and you used to be the best of friends and companions. Think of it, Caroline. If not one of them, take some other lady: and a desirable inmate would not be difficult to find.

"Meanwhile, I beg you to remember what I said to you in regard to Barnaby Dawkes. Dismiss him at once from intimacy, and gradually drop his acquaintance altogether. I should not bid you do this, Caroline, without good and sufficient reason.

"One thing more. If you are ever in need of advice or counsel, or aid of any sort, send for me. Whatever my engagements may be, I will not fail to come to you without delay.

"Give my love to my little namesake, Thomas. Train him

well. Oh, Caroline, train him well in the best sense of the word: you will find all comfort in doing it. And believe me ever your faithful friend and affectionate cousin,

"THOMAS C. C. KAGE."

This note lay in Mrs. Canterbury's bosom, now as she sat. She was in a very humble frame of mind, and counted the friendship of such a man as something.

But it was a great deal easier to say, dismiss Barnaby Dawkes at once from intimacy, than it might be to do it. Besides, Caroline could not quite see the urgent necessity for this step. He was little Tom's friend and playmate—there they were now, playing on the lawn—and what harm could it do? So that portion of the letter, and it was the only one calling for prompt action, she disregarded.

"Mamma, there's the carriage at the door," said the little fellow, running in, with his imperfect speech.

Mrs. Canterbury took him on her knee, kissing him passionately. Beyond this child, she had nothing in life to satisfy the longing of an aching heart; and hers was so young still! The many years to come looked long and dreary enough when she cast a thought to them.

"Be a good boy, my darling. Mamma must go."

Her maid appeared with a cloak, and Mrs. Canterbury rose. Captain Dawkes, coming in through the open window, took the mantle and asked leave to place it on her shoulders. Then he offered his arm to conduct her to the carriage, and assisted her in. It was all done in a quiet, almost deprecating kind of way. Neither Mrs. Canterbury nor anybody else could have taken alarm at it. The last thing she saw, as she drove away, was her boy kissing his hand to her from Captain Dawkes's shoulder.

Within a week of this time, Captain Dawkes left Chilling for London, to hold his interview with Mrs. Garston—as was before related. On the third day he was back again. Mrs. Canterbury was genuinely pleased to see him; the little boy had felt sadly dull, and in truth so had she. She had no love for Captain Dawkes, but she liked him; and such was the monotony of her life, that he, their daily visitor, had been sensibly missed. He told Mrs. Canterbury that he had made

it all right with that old aunt of his, and that she had placed his succession to her fortune beyond doubt.

The autumn days went on, and with them Mrs. Canterbury's sense of isolation. When the first sting of Thomas Kage's rejection had in a degree worn away, she grew to resent it, and her mind filled itself with bitter feelings towards him. She began to contrast his heartless rejection of her with Captain Dawkes's unobtrusive homage. Oh, Barnaby Dawkes was playing his cards well! And the stakes were high.

Mrs. Kage, looking on with sharpened eyes, took alarm. The captain's visits to the Rock grew, in her mind, more suspicious. One evening, going there to dinner at dusk, she saw Caroline on his arm, pacing the dim walks; and the two seemed to be talking confidentially. Mrs. Kage made her way to a private room, and sent a mandate for her daughter. Caroline received the reproaches coolly.

"There's not the slightest cause for this, mamma. Even if I were going to marry Captain Dawkes, as you seem to insist upon it that I must be, what should you have to urge against it?"

Mrs. Kage was in too great a passion to say what. She broke the stopper of her choicest smelling-bottle.

"Captain Dawkes is a gentleman, mamma. Looking after my money? Oh dear, no; he has no need to look after it, he will have plenty of his own. All Mrs. Garston's will be his, you know."

"That's just what I don't know," shrieked Mrs. Kage. "And if I did, I don't like the man, Caroline. I'm sure there's something or other against him. What has he been staying at Chilling for, all this time, I should like to know? He's playing a part, that's what he is; and his pretended love for little Tom is all put on—it's as false as he is. Oh, my poor nerves! why do you excite me, Caroline?"

Caroline only laughed in answer, and said that dinner was waiting. Mrs. Kage liked her dinner very much, and did not keep it waiting long.

But, to Mrs. Canterbury's intense surprise, she heard the next day that her mother and her mother's maid, Fry, had gone to London. Captain Dawkes held his breath when *he*

heard it, and asked what they had gone for. Oh, just a whim, she supposed, was Caroline's careless answer; and after that she thought no more about it.

Mrs. Kage, more energetic than was her usual custom, had taken a sudden resolution to clear up the mystery that, in her opinion, surrounded Captain Dawkes. She and that gentleman owned to a kind of subtle instinct against each other; and it would not be too much to say that she had hated him since the day he was bold enough to insinuate that her delicate complexion did not owe its lovely tints to nature. For the rude man to aspire to Caroline and her wealth, was worse than gall and wormwood to Mrs. Kage; and she determined to go and learn a little about him from Mrs. Garston. To whose house she proceeded amidst a dense November fog on the day after her arrival in London.

But, what with Mrs. Kage's mincing affectation, always in extreme flow in society, what with Mrs. Garston's deafness, always worse when under any surprise, the interview was a little complicated. Compliments over—which Mrs. Kage entered upon and Mrs. Garston received ungraciously, inwardly wondering, and very nearly asking, why so battered-looking an old creature, her head nodding incessantly, should have come out from her home—the visitor entered upon her business; explaining, rather frankly for her, the motive of her visit—that she feared Mrs. Garston's relative, Captain Dawkes, was casting covetous eyes on her daughter, with a view to marriage and to grasping her daughter's wealth. She prayed Mrs. Garston to feel for her, and candidly tell her *what* there was against Captain Dawkes—it was something bad, she felt sure—that she might "open Caroline's eyes to his machinations."

But now, between the mincing tone, and the frequent application to one or other of those auxiliaries to weak nerves, the scent-bottles, all that Mrs. Garston comprehended of this harangue, was, that Barnaby Dawkes was going to be married.

"Oh," said she, "made up his mind at last, has he? He has taken his time over it. It's a good two months since he sat where you do, talking it over with me."

Mrs. Kage felt inclined to faint. "Did you approve of it, then?"

"Did I *what?*" asked Mrs. Garston.

"Uphold him in his crafty scheme? I would never have believed it!"

Had Mrs. Garston caught the word crafty, her answer might have been explosive. It was only hard.

"Barnaby Dawkes told me he wanted to marry. Keziah as good as told me; promising he would then be as steady as old Time. I neither said to him 'do,' nor 'don't,' but I told him, if he did marry the girl, he might look to me for an income."

"Dear me! Do you think it right to play with a lady's name in that free way?" demanded Mrs. Kage, gently touching her nose with essence of lavender.

"Right!" retorted Mrs. Garston; "the girl's dying for him."

Mrs. Kage's head nodded ominously.

"Well, I'm sure! How dare you say such a thing of my daughter?"

"Say it of *whom?*"

"My daughter; Mrs. Canterbury. Deaf old model!" added the honourable lady for her own especial benefit.

"Who did say it of your daughter?" retorted Mrs. Garston, bringing down her stick with such force that the visitor leaped upwards. "It was of Belle Annesley!"

Mrs. Kage thought they must be at cross-purposes, and blamed the deafness.

"I don't think you understand, ma'am."

"I don't think *you* do!" was Mrs. Garston's irascible answer. "It's Belle Annesley that Barby Dawkes is going to marry, if he marries at all. He has been courting her for these two or three years past."

Bit by bit, it all came out; at least the version of it that lay in the old lady's mind. They wanted, she was told, to get married; and she had smoothed the way by promising to settle on them seven hundred a-year, which with Belle's three hundred when her mother died—and that might not be long first—would make their income a thousand. The relief to Mrs. Kage was something better than perfume. She opened her fan, and gently wafted a little cool air to her heated face. As she was doing this, a question arose to her, and she put it openly:

"Why, if Captain Dawkes were going to marry Belle Annesley, should he remain so long at Chilling?"

Mrs. Garston was at no fault for an answer; the reason, to her mind, was clear enough.

"I said I'd pay his debts on the wedding-day; but I expect my gentleman has such a pack of them, that he is trying to make an arrangement with his creditors to take less than their due, because he is ashamed of letting me know the extent of the whole."

"Oh, Captain Dawkes has debts, then!" said Mrs. Kage.

"Bushels of 'em; he never was without debts, and he never will be, that's more. The money I settle will be settled upon *her* and her children. I wouldn't trust it to his mercy."

"He tells society at Chilling that he is to be your sole heir."

"Does he! 'Society' needn't believe him."

"Will he be?"

"My heir!" and down came the stick with decision. "No, he never will! I wouldn't make Barby Dawkes my heir to save him from perishing. If he marries Belle, he gets what I told you; otherwise, he'll never have more from me than will keep him on bread-and-cheese in lodgings. Barby knows all this just as well as I do. I went into it with him when he was last here."

"I think he must be—if you'll excuse my saying it—rather given to telling falsehoods," spoke Mrs. Kage.

Out it all came. Thus set off on the score of Barby's boastings and doings, Mrs. Garston told all the ill she knew of him. His fast living, and his accumulations of debt; his meannesses, and deludings of creditors; his startings afresh on his legs, through her, and his speedy topplings-over again. Mrs. Kage placidly folded her hands as she listened, and hoped Miss Belle Annesley would get "a bargain." Any lady was welcome to him, provided it was not her own daughter; and in her intense selfishness she would not have lifted a finger to save Belle Annesley from him.

"It's the best thing he can do; they'll get along on a thousand a-year; very—ah—generous of you, I'm sure! I suppose he is—ah—attached to her?"

"If he's not, he ought to be," snapped Mrs. Garston. "He's

made enough love to her, they say; and she has been pining out her heart for him, silly child!"

"Vastly silly," assented Mrs. Kage, surreptitiously flinging some pungent drops on the carpet.

"Barby seemed to be doubtful about the marriage when we were having matters out together, and said he must take time to consider—afraid of his mass of debts, I suppose; I'll answer for it, some of them are not of too reputable a nature. He soon made up his mind, though; for he went straight from me that night to Belle Annesley, and Dickey Dunn's wife found him there love-making. Every mortal day since have I been expecting him here to claim my promise, and get money-matters put in train for the marriage; and I know by the delay he is in some deep mess that it's not so easy to get out of."

"No doubt," murmured Mrs. Kage. "And he has found the Rock good quarters to dine at whilst he's doing it. Won't Caroline listen when I open the budget!"

"He will contrive it, though; he is crafty and keen," pursued Mrs. Garston, not having caught a syllable of the intervening words. "I shouldn't wonder but they'll be married now before Christmas. I told Belle so when she was here two or three days ago; it made her blush as red as a robin. She confessed to having had a letter from him that very morning."

Perhaps no diplomatist ever went away from an interview more completely satisfied than Mrs. Kage from hers. Her fears in regard to the gallant captain and Caroline were laid to rest. She purposed returning to Chilling on the morrow and carrying her budget with her, making herself comfortable meanwhile at her hotel.

But now, whether it was that the journey up had been too much for her strength, or that the London fog had affected her, Mrs. Kage, on the evening of this same day, found herself feeling ill. The following morning she seemed very ill; and Fry, her maid, called in a doctor. That functionary decided that she had taken a severe cold, and said she must not attempt to quit her bedroom, or to travel for at least a week. Lying at rest, and being petted with nice invalid dishes—game and jelly, and similar good things, and plenty of mulled wine—was rather agreeable than not to Mrs. Kage. The week passed

pleasantly enough, in spite of its solitude. She sent to ask Sarah Annesley, that was, to come and see her; but learnt that Richard Dunn and his wife were staying at Brighton.

At the week's end Mrs. Kage went home. Fry wanted her to break the journey by sleeping on the road, but Mrs. Kage did not like strange inns, and hurried on. She reached home at nine at night, too much done up for anything but bed.

Breakfast was taken to her in the morning. Poor wan old thing she looked in her night-cap, sitting up to eat it! Without her face embellishments, she did not like to be stared at, even by Fry; and she sharply told the maid to come back for the tray when she had finished. Between the intervals of her going and returning, Fry chanced to hear a piece of news; and when she went in again it was with a face as white as her mistress's, though not so haggard.

Report ran that Mrs. Canterbury had gone out of the Rock on her way to church, to be married to Captain Dawkes.

"Eh?" exclaimed Mrs. Kage, too much startled to realize the words, and looking up in a helpless manner.

"I think it's true, ma'am," said Fry. "The sexton's boy is telling them downstairs."

How Mrs. Kage was rushed into her clothes, her bonnet put on, and her face made passable, and got down to the church in the space of a few minutes, Fry says she shall never know to her dying day. The news was true, and Mrs. Kage was not in time.

Very, very true. Captain Dawkes, taking alarm no doubt at the mother's sudden journey to London, had made good play with Mrs. Canterbury, and persuaded her to a quick and quiet marriage. That the sore feeling induced by the rejection of Thomas Kage urged her on in fatal blindness was, no doubt, the secret of her acceding. But that was known only to herself, and is of little moment to us. The unhappy step was taken, and already past redemption.

The ceremony had just concluded, and the bride and bridegroom, with Keziah for bridesmaid, and a friend of Captain Dawkes's as groomsman, were leaving the altar for the vestry. Caroline wore a quiet grey-silk dress and white bonnet; Keziah similar attire. Mrs. Kage, a variety of emotions giving her

wings, flew into the vestry after them. Fry sat down in a pew to wait.

That a scene of confusion ensued will readily be imagined. Noise, reproaches, tumult. Captain Dawkes and Keziah, their end attained, were cool and calm as unbroken ice; but for the clergyman, Mr. Rufort's substitute, they had politely, but forcibly, conducted Mrs. Kage from the church again. The Reverend Mr. Jennings, a middle-aged, fresh-coloured, capable man, stood by Mrs. Kage and protected her.

"I *will* speak," panted that lady; "I am her mother;" and Mr. Jennings told them decisively that the speaker ought to be heard. But perhaps he was not prepared for quite all she had to say.

Every accusation that Mrs. Garston had made on Barnaby Dawkes, every disparaging epithet she had applied to him, Mrs. Kage repeated; affirming that it was as true as gospel. She was really agitated, and for once in her life affectation was thrown aside, as she demanded whether the ceremony could not be unsaid. Caroline, between fright and emotion, burst into tears.

"You have cause to cry, child, Heaven knows. He has been hiding down here all this time from his creditors; he is engaged to that sweet girl, who is breaking her heart for him; they were to have been married before Christmas. Oh, Caroline, it is not you he wants, but your money, to help him out of his debts! He has millions of them. Deny it if you dare!" she added, with a shriek, stamping at Barby.

And with that shriek Mrs. Kage broke down. She sank on a chair, white and cold; the exertion had been rather too much for the worn-out frame. No one saw anything amiss: it was only supposed she had no more to say.

Caroline, utterly bewildered, doubting, sick, not knowing what to believe or disbelieve, looked at her new husband. It had not been Barnaby Dawkes if he had failed in his powers of rhetoric now. With a smile of calm content at the torrent of words, and of sweetness for Caroline, he put her hand within his arm, and spoke a few low earnest syllables of reassurance. He turned to the clergyman, and quietly declared the whole thing a mistake; a tissue of misrepresentations from beginning

to end—as the future would prove. And such was his cool, self-asserting manner, that the clergyman yielded belief to it as well as the young wife.

"These stories have been concocted by Mrs. Garston," spoke Keziah, boldly. "She was bitterly against my brother's marrying, and hoped to stop it. The poor ancient lady is in her dotage."

With a sob of relief, Caroline looked at her husband as he led her down the aisle. She implicitly believed in him, and a smile rose to her face to chase away the tears. Fry stood up as they passed her, and curtsied. The groomsman led out Keziah; the clergyman followed slowly at a distance, his surplice on still.

It was not in Fry's nature to stay behind. The bride and bridegroom were going away from the church-door direct on their wedding-tour; the carriage had post-horses to it, an imperial was on it, a man and maid-servant behind. Captain Dawkes handed in his bride, and they set off at a canter. Keziah, who would be going back to London in the course of the day, started on foot for her brother's cottage to change her attire, the groomsman by her side.

"But where's my mistress?" exclaimed Fry, turning round when she had sufficiently feasted her eyes, and could see only the back of the carriage fading away in the distance.

"She is in the vestry," said Mr. Jennings. "I held out my arm to her, but she would not notice it. It is a sad pity, Fry, she should be put about like this by the marriage."

"It has come upon her so sudden, you see, sir, for one thing," was Fry's answer.

"So it seems. When Captain Dawkes came to me last night about the arrangements—and that was the first intimation I had of it—I'm sure I thought he said Mrs. Kage was privy to it. My mistake, I suppose."

Fry hastened on to the vestry. Mr. Jennings, returning more leisurely, and unbuttoning his surplice as he walked, was surprised to see her dart out again, livid with fright.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Oh, sir, please come and see! My mistress is fallen sideways, with the most dreadful face you ever saw."

The Reverend Mr. Jennings made but one step to the vestry. Mrs. Kage had been seized with paralysis.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BREAKING THE NEWS TO BELLE.

Mrs. Garston's handsome carriage, with its fat old coachman on the box, and its footman behind, holding his gold-headed stick slantwise, was steadily making its way along the Strand. But that Mrs. Garston was a little eccentric, ordering her carriage out at all hours as the mood took her, her servants might have wondered what took her abroad so early this morning. St. Mary's Church clock was striking eleven as they bowled past it.

Thomas Kage felt surprised, if the servants did not. He was hard at work in his chambers on the dull November morning, when Mrs. Garston's footman penetrated to the room, saying his mistress was coming up. Hastening down, Mr. Kage met her on the first flight of stairs, ascending by help of her stick. She took his arm without a word of greeting, and pointed upwards. He stirred his fire into a blaze, and brought forward the most comfortable chair for her to sit in.

"Have you heard the news?" she shortly asked. And they were the first words she had spoken. Mr. Kage replied that he had heard none in particular.

Upon that Mrs. Garston dived into her pocket, and brought forth two letters, which she placed on the table. She was relieving herself of some weighty emotion by emphatic raps with her stick. Thomas Kage wondered what in the world had happened.

"She'll repent it to the last hour of her life. Mark you that, Thomas—though I may not live to see it. I thought her a fool for making that other marriage, but she was not half the fool then that she is now."

And still Thomas Kage was in the dark.

The two letters before Mrs. Garston were written, one by Barnaby Dawkes, airily announcing his marriage with Mrs. Canterbury; the other by Keziah. Keziah very briefly mentioned the ceremony at which she had assisted: and followed

it up by telling of the seizure of Mrs. Kage. She, Keziah, intended to remain with the sick woman that one night; and a despatch had been sent after Mrs. Dawkes, who might be expected to return on the morrow. Altogether, what with one untoward event and another, Caroline's second marriage did not seem to have been inaugurated happily.

"Married! To *him*—and in this indecent haste!" Thomas Kage could not help exclaiming. "What can have induced it?"

"Induced it!" wrathfully echoed Mrs. Garston. "Why, his persuasive tongue, his cajolery—that's what has induced it. Barby Dawkes, with his rolling eyes and his oily tongue, would wile a door off its hinges. I understand now the reason for his burying himself alive in the place, and concealing it from everybody. I understand why Keziah made a mystery of it to me, and pretended that the place was in Wales, and she couldn't pronounce the name. He has been at Chilling all the time, practising his arts on George Canterbury's widow."

Thomas Kage, standing against the window and looking dreamily out, remembered how he had heard the news of her first marriage in this self-same spot. *This* did not shake him as that had done; proving how well time had exercised its healing properties. Brought face to face with her the night that they stood together lately at the Rock, some of the old passion cropped up in his heart, and it had almost seemed to him that he loved her as of yore: in that hour of sentiment, when practical reality was lost sight of in romance, it could scarcely have been otherwise. All his present grief was felt for Caroline, and it was intensely keen. He saw, with a certainty so great as to partake of the nature of prevision, that this marriage was almost the worst mistake she could possibly have made.

Mrs. Garston rose from her chair and came towards him, tapping his arm with her forefinger, her eyes and face almost solemnly in earnest.

"Look you, Thomas—the marriage will not bring Barby good. It has been brought about by deceit. He has been deceiving her all along as to himself, his character, his means; he has been miserably deceiving that unhappy child Belle

Annesley. Grand stroke of fortune though it may be in his opinion, it will never bring him good."

"I am sure it will not bring her good," cried Thomas Kage impetuously.

"I know now what his game was. He has been playing fast and loose with Belle, intending to take her if the richer scheme failed. I know now why he wanted his time to consider of it; and who he meant when he asked me if I would make the same terms if he married another. Ah, ah, Mr. Barby; you would afterwards have persuaded me it was my deafness that heard the question amiss! You and Keziah have been acting together to deceive me and gain your ends: it may not serve you much in the long-run."

Thomas Kage gave no answer.

"She has a waggon-load of wealth, but he'll get through as much as he can of it," proceeded the shrewd old lady. "I've never had much love for Barby, or Keziah either; I dislike them now. What have they cared for playing with the feelings of Belle, so that their turn was served? He liked her too. And it is not Mrs. Canterbury he has abandoned the girl for, but Mrs. Canterbury's money. Old Canterbury was a fool ever to leave her such a prey."

Very true. From first to last the will seemed to have brought nothing but ill. Last? The last had not come yet.

"I'm sorry for the poor old woman, Thomas. It seems she has some feeling, for all her affected folly. You should have seen her the day she came to me—with her painted cheeks and her girl's white bonnet and flowers; and her palsied head nodding nineteen to the dozen over all. She brought in a fan and a cargo of smelling-bottles—it's as true as that I'm telling it. I'm afraid, too, I misled her—saying that it was Belle Annesley Barby was going to marry; but then, you see, I thought it was. Oh, they are crafty, he and Keziah! But for hoodwinking me, and causing me to say what I did, Mrs. Kage might have gone back at once to Chilling, and stopped the marriage."

"Yes, it might have been so," Thomas acknowledged. But he remembered what he himself had told Caroline of Barnaby Dawkes, and therefore he felt that she was almost as much to blame as he. What infatuation could have blinded her?

"And now I'll go," said Mrs. Garston. "And, Thomas, you'd better call in at Belle Annesley's and break the news to her. It will be a blow; mind you that. Better not let it come upon her suddenly. I'm sorry for the child. So long as she was no better than a stage dancing-girl, flirting with every man she came near, I'd have nothing to say to her except abuse; but she was wise in time, and put all that aside. You break it to her: you know how to do such things; and so did your mother before you."

"I shall not be able to leave my chambers until late in the day."

"Very well; it will keep. Dickey Dunn and his wife are away, and there's no one else would be likely to tell her. For the matter of that, I don't suppose it's known to a soul in London except you and me. There'll be a flaming paragraph in the *Times* to-morrow, as there was last time she had a wedding, but it couldn't be got in to-day. Oh, Barby Dawkes is a crafty one!"

Seizing Thomas Kage's arm, Mrs. Garston moved towards the door. Suddenly she dropped it again.

"You are trustee to the child's money, I think, Thomas?"

"Yes."

"Take you good care of it then, or Barby will be too many for you. He'd wring the heart out of a living man, if it were made of gold."

Thomas Kage smiled; but there was nevertheless a very determined tone in his voice as he gave his answer.

"So long as I am in trust, he shall never wring a sixpence out of me belonging to the boy, Mrs. Garston. Rely upon that."

Mrs. Garston nodded with some satisfaction; and stood to take a look from the window. The river flowed on drearily, the grass looked poor, even Mr. Broome's chrysanthemums, dying away, had a sombre aspect as of the dead.

"It's a dull look-out, Thomas. I think I'd rather see plain bricks-and-mortar."

"All things look dull on these dark November days. You should see it in the spring sunshine."

"I can't think, for my part, how old Broome gets his

flowers to such perfection. They must have been a show a month ago."

"Indeed they were; a very fine one."

"I'll go, Thomas, now. I suppose I'm only hindering you. Show me where you sleep first."

He opened the door of his bedroom, and Mrs. Garston and her stick marched round it, making her comments.

"Not bad for a makeshift: sheets and counterpane a tolerable colour; places tidy. Who makes your bed, Thomas?"

"A woman comes to do all I want. She is the boy's mother."

"Does she shake up the feathers well? Some of 'em are too lazy to give it more than a turn and a push."

"It's a mattress," he answered, laughing.

"Ah, that was one of Lady Kage's crotchets, I remember—mattresses. Well, I'm glad to see there's some approach to comfort for you, Thomas; but you'd be better off in your own home."

"Indeed I am glad that Mr. Rashburn has remained my tenant so long. The lease will be out next year, Mrs. Garston——"

"Do you suppose I don't know that?" was the interruption. "Mine will be out as well as yours."

"And I am not sure but I shall give it up," he added. "A single man does not need a house of that sort."

"Give it up, will you? Just as you please, Thomas Kage. Your mother thought you'd be a good son and neighbour to me; but her wishes and mine don't go for much, I see."

"Indeed they do, dear Mrs. Garston."

"Indeed they *don't*. Would you ever have gone out of your house, else, and let it to strangers?"

She walked rapidly through the rooms as she spoke, ungraciously accepting his arm at the stairs. Mr. Kage helped her into her carriage—to the admiration of a small collection of urchins, who had assembled to stare at the equipage and the imposing footman.

"Good-bye, Thomas Kage. You'll come in to dinner, and tell me how the child takes it." And he nodded assent as the carriage rolled off.

Mr. Kage did not by any means like his task; for he knew that he should inflict pain. But he accepted it as a duty. Some one would have to do it—better himself than a stranger.

He did not get up westward until long after dusk had set in; which came on early that gloomy day. Belle Annesley, quite unconscious of the shock that was in store for her, was at that time in her mother's chamber. Mrs. Annesley, in an invalid wrapper, her feet stretched out to the warm fire, had dozed off in her easy-chair. Belle, seated on a low stool on the other side, was indulging herself with a peep at Barnaby Dawkes's last letter, not yet a fortnight old, holding the pages noiselessly to the firelight, when a servant came in and said Mr. Kage was below. The noise, slight though it was, aroused the sleeper; and Belle, as if by magic, had nothing at all in her hands.

"What did Ann say, my dear?"

"Mr. Kage has called, mamma. Shall I go down?"

"Of course. He has come to see me, Belle; but I am very tired to-night. Perhaps, if he does not mind, he would come in another evening."

"I'll tell him," said Belle, gleefully, the soft passages of the hidden letter—meaning nothing to an impartial ear—making melody in her mind. "But, mamma dear, I think he might do you good. I am sure you want rousing, and Thomas Kage is very gentle."

"Not this evening, dear; not this evening. Is it tea-time, Belle?"

"It will be soon. I'll dismiss Mr. Kage in a whirlwind of hurry, and come and make it."

"Ah, child, what spirits you have! And you were for a long time so downhearted. I never knew why, or what the reason was; but you've recovered all your natural gaiety of late."

"The reason?—why, mamma, I was lamenting for my sins!" spoke Belle, with a light laugh. "Don't you know what a naughty girl I used to be? Don't you remember the uneasiness I gave you? Sarah often said I frightened her: but we called her an old maid in those days."

Mrs. Annesley was looking at her daughter. The gay tone,

the glad countenance, the dainty dress—a pale-blue gleaming silk—all told of a mind at rest within.

"What are you dressed for, child?"

"This is Mrs. Lowther's night."

"To be sure. You are going there."

"But not for ages yet, mamma. I shall have tea with you first, and go in at my leisure: seven o'clock or so. The children won't leave till nine or ten. Perhaps Thomas Kage has come to go with me. I never thought of that."

Glancing at her pretty self in the glass, touching her golden hair and the blue ribbons that mingled with it—for Miss Belle was a vain little coquette still at heart—she ran lightly down. Thomas Kage was standing by the dining-room fire.

"Have you come to accompany me to Mrs. Lowther's?" she asked, as he shook hands.

"To Mrs. Lowther's? No."

"She has a children's party to-night. I shall make mamma's tea and take some with her before I go in. Perhaps you came to see mamma, then? But she is tired; she has been very low and weak all the afternoon."

"No, not your mamma. My visit is to you, Belle."

He had never smiled once: tone and face were alike remarkably grave. She could not but notice it; and one of those instincts of ill, that perhaps we have all experienced, stole over her.

"Have you brought me any bad news, Thomas?" she asked, calling him by the familiar name, as she had done before at earnest moments. "Mrs. Garston is not ill."

"Mrs. Garston is quite well. She has had some news from the country to-day, and I—I have come to tell you what it is."

"Good news, or bad?"

"It relates to a wedding; but I call it bad. Won't you sit down, Belle?"

"I would rather stand. I've been sitting all day in mamma's room. Well?"

"A friend of yours has been getting married, Belle," he continued, thinking how very badly he was performing his task, now that the critical moment had come. "Can you guess who it is?"

"A friend of mine! Oh, I can't guess. It's no one that I care much to hear about, I suppose. I have no very close friends, Thomas; except married ones."

She was perplexingly unsuspicious. Thomas Kage did not speak for a minute, and the young lady took occasion to call his attention to her attire.

"Is not this a lovely dress?" pulling the skirt out with her hands to show off its beauty. "If mamma were as particular as she used to be, she would grumble like anything at my wearing it to a children's party. But she's not. She says I am changed; I'm sure *she* is."

"Belle, I must get my news out," he said with sudden resolution. "I am beating about the bush, my dear, because I dislike to have to give you pain. Of all the people in the world, whose marriage would you be the most unpleasantly surprised to hear of?"

"Of all the people in the world?" repeated Belle, dropping her dress and lifting her innocent face. "Do you mean the women?"

"No; the men."

"Oh, I—I don't know."

The colour was beginning to flush her face, her voice to hesitate. But still Belle had not the least suspicion of the astounding news. To connect any one in marriage now with Barnaby Dawkes was simply impossible, unless it had been herself. Looking at Thomas Kage from a hopeless sea of mist, the notion suddenly flashed over her that some harm had happened to the gallant gentleman.

"Have you—come to tell me anything bad about—about Captain Dawkes?" she timidly whispered, drooping her head.

"You may call it bad. I would not pain you with it if I could help, Belle."

"He was not in that—oh, Mr. Kage, there was an awful railway accident in the *Times* this morning! He was not in that?"

"No, no. Captain Dawkes has been behaving like a villain: it is neither more nor less. Can't you take my hint, child?"

Belle's face was growing whiter than chalk.

"You must tell me, please," came from her trembling lips.

"Dawkes is married."

Oh, the sound of anguish that broke from that poor girl's heart! Mr. Kage thought she was going to faint, and threw his arm round her.

"My dear child, be calm. You see now how utterly unworthy he has always been of you."

"Will you please put me in a chair?" she gently said.

He was just in time. She did not quite faint, only lay like a dead weight for some minutes, and then her heart began to beat frightfully. Thomas Kage would not call assistance for her sake. Presently she sat up, trying to be brave, and leaned her cheek upon her hand. He drew his chair close.

"Now tell me all about it, please. I must know. Whom has he married?"

"Mrs. Canterbury of the Rock."

"Mrs. Canterbury of the Rock!" almost shrieked the girl in her surprise. "Oh—then—it may be for her money. It—may not—have been—for love."

"Be you very sure that money would outweigh love in his estimation any day," spoke Mr. Kage, with scornful emphasis.

"But she is young, and very lovely," came the bitter rejoinder, the one grain of comfort losing itself in torment. "Nearly as young as I am."

Mr. Kage took the listless, trembling hands in his, speaking gently. "You must regard me as a brother, Belle—I have asked you this before—and pour out your soul's trouble to me. It will make it easier for you to bear. I went through the same ordeal once myself, child, and can give you back sympathy for sympathy, sigh for sigh. I was the fittest person to break this to you—and badly enough I've done it—but I knew I should be more welcome than a stranger. All that you are suffering *I* suffered: suffered for years."

Belle bent her head and let her cold forehead rest a moment on Mr. Kage's hands as they held hers. It was a token that she understood and thanked him.

"Was it for *her?* I can feel more at ease if you tell me. We will keep each other's secret for ever."

"Yes, it was."

"I think I'll go to mamma, please," she said, attempting to rise; and her bosom was heaving, and her voice seemed to have lost its life. But Mr. Kage detained her.

"An instant, while I speak to you of Barnaby Dawkes. I can now give you my opinon freely. While there was a possibility that—that a nearer tie might some time exist between you, my tongue was tied."

"You have never thought well of him."

"Annabel, there exists not a man in the world whose conduct I think much worse of than I do of his. I do not believe that he has the smallest sense of honour. He is a false, pitiful, self-indulgent coward. Had you married him, I feel persuaded he would have made your life a misery."

"And she? Will hers be that?"

"I fear so; but in a less degree, perhaps, than yours would have been. With her vast wealth, they can live as fashionable people—he going his way, she hers."

A moment's pause. Was Belle about to faint again? Her wan face suggested it. Thomas Kage rose, holding her hands still and bending over her.

"My dear, believe me, and try to realize what I say to your own heart. A marriage with Barnaby Dawkes would have been nothing but a great misfortune. Take comfort. Your pain just now is difficult to bear, but I think you will be able, regarding him as entirely lost to you, to throw it off day by day. *I* had to do it."

She wrung his hands with a lingering grasp, and turned to leave the room. As he was opening the door for her, she stopped.

"I cannot go to Mrs. Lowther's. Do you mind telling her? Say—say—— Oh, Thomas, I don't know what you can say! I had so faithfully promised to go."

"I will say that Mrs. Annesley is very tired to-night, and you do not care to come out. Leave it to me. God bless and comfort you, child!"

She went straight to her own chamber—not at present was she fit for mortal eyes—and there she strove to battle out the first fury of the pitiless storm. Desolation! desolation!

Amidst all the tumult of her unhappy heart, Annabel Annesley was conscious that it would be nothing less for ever.

When she emerged from the room, her silken robe had been replaced by one plain and soft, the blue ribbons were no longer in her hair. There was no emotion visible, no sign left of the anguish she had passed through; her face and herself were alike strangely quiet.

"My love, how long you have been!" exclaimed Mrs. Annesley, glancing at the yet unused tea-tray that waited on the table.

"I am very sorry, mamma. You shall have your tea in one minute. I have been taking my dress off."

The tone of the voice seemed changed; it was so meekly subdued as to sound like one of despair. Mrs. Annesley glanced at Belle, busy with the tea-cups, and noted the change of attire.

"Why, what's that for?"

"I don't care to go to Mrs. Lowther's, after all. I will stay with you instead, mamma."

Her mother alone henceforth. Belle had nothing else left in life to cherish now.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AT MRS. RICHARD DUNN'S.

Another year had come in, and was coursing onwards. The sweet May flowers were above ground, the May sunshine was making gay even London streets; those fine white houses in Paradise Square seemed ablaze with its light.

In one of the best of the said houses, the one owned by Richard Dunn, there sat, in what is called an American chair, a young girl in deep mourning, who was coughing sadly. Her face, surrounded by its golden hair, was painfully thin, her form shadowy. She was tired of sitting by the fire, and had drawn the chair to the window to sit in the sunshine. You would scarcely have known her for the Belle Annesley of six months before.

Mrs. Annesley had died in March. The home was broken up; and Belle, with her three hundred a-year, had been staying since with her cousin, Mrs. Richard Dunn. Where her home would eventually be fixed was not decided; all concerned were content to leave it to the future. It was proposed that in the autumn Belle should go out on a visit to her brother in the West Indies, and so avoid the cold of the next English winter, for her chest seemed delicate.

Her chest seemed delicate: it was said from one to another. The girl was wasting away to death before their eyes, and yet it was all they saw! "She coughed too much, and her chest was weak, and she grew thin grieving for her mother!" Oh, they were all blind together.

The first to see any reason for apprehension was Mrs. Garston; what was there that the keen old eyes did not see? Belle—poor, sick, weary, hopeless, grieving child—had been strangely averse to going out for a long while. Before her mother died, the plea of remaining with her was an excuse; since her death, *that* had been the plea. But Mrs. Garston drove one morning to Richard Dunn's, gave them a sound trimming all round for yielding to Miss Belle's inertness, and carried the young lady off with her for the rest of the day; at least, until twilight approached. She sent her back in the carriage then, telling her to keep the windows shut; and when Thomas Kage came as usual in the evening, abruptly met him with the announcement that Belle Annesley was dying. Mr. Kage, seeing Belle often, for he generally went in to Richard Dunn's two or three evenings in the week, rather disputed this; and it aroused Mrs. Garston's ire. Contradiction always did. He had certainly thought Belle looking ill when he returned home from circuit, but he attributed it to her mother's death, and perhaps somewhat to the mourning robes.

"How long is it since you saw her by daylight?" demanded Mrs. Garston.

Thomas Kage could not remember. Not, he thought, since last winter.

"If you are not quite overdone with work to-morrow, just quit it for an hour, Thomas Kage. To hear you talk of the amount of business on your shoulders, one would think you

must be making your fortune as quickly as it would take an air-balloon to get from here to Jericho."

"I have to do a great deal of work for very little pay," he answered laughingly. "It is only the great guns amongst us who make fortunes."

"You 'don't see much change in her!' she has 'a bright colour of an evening'! You are a fool, Thomas Kage!"

"But——"

"Now don't begin a dispute. Anybody, *not* a fool, would know that invalids like Belle always do pick up in an evening. If you can spare a couple of hours of that precious time of yours, go and see her to-morrow by daylight, and then come and tell me whether I'm right or wrong. Will you do this?"

"Yes, I will."

And accordingly on this very day, when Belle had just drawn her chair into the sunshine in Mrs. Dunn's handsome drawing-room, Thomas Kage walked in. He talked of indifferent matters with as cool an air as if he were conscious of no secret motive for calling; chiefly to Mrs. Dunn and Mrs. Dunn's baby, a little damsel who sat on her mamma's knee, fiercely biting away at a coral and flinging her small fat arms about. But he took the opportunity to glance between whiles at the rocking-chair opposite him, and at her who sat in it. Wan, white, shadowy; her blue eyes weary, her golden hair somewhat neglected; the thin hands lying inertly on the black crape; so sat she. A pang of regret darted through Thomas Kage.

"How long has your cough been so troublesome, Belle?" he asked, as the baby grew restless, and Mrs. Dunn rose to carry it about. Not that it was a violent cough, but hacking and frequent.

"Oh, I don't know. I had it last spring. It went away when the hot weather came in."

"I shall feel your pulse, young lady, being a bit of a doctor." He crossed over, and took her hand in his; a hot, damp, fragile hand, its palm very pink. Thomas Kage laid it down again, and put his gentle fingers on her forehead.

"I have had a doctor," said Belle. "Mr. and Mrs. Dunn called in Dr. Tyndal, in spite of my saying there was nothing

the matter with me. There is nothing, Thomas, except the cough: and that will go away with the arrival of warm weather."

"What did the doctor say to you?"

"Say! That nothing did ail me, that he could find out. He says it every time he comes."

"He really does," interposed Mrs. Dunn, tossing the baby in her arms as she spoke. "I tell him that Belle gets thinner; but he seems to think there is no cause for it. He says he has several young patients suffering from coughs; through the coldness of the spring, he thinks. Why, here's May, and we have had no warm weather yet. If the sun shines, it is only with a cold brilliancy."

"I should say he is a muff," remarked Thomas Kage. "The doctor I mean; not the sun."

Mrs. Dunn laughed, Belle laughed; and the laughing appeared to offend the baby, who set up a defiant cry. Upon which Mrs. Dunn left the room to consign her to ignominy and the nursery.

"Belle," said Thomas Kage, in low tender tones, seating himself near her and bending forward, "you are letting past troubles lay hold of you."

The wan face became lovely with a crimson flush

"No," she said evasively; "no."

"Nay, Belle, speak the truth, as to your own heart. *It is so.*"

There was just a little feeble battle with the instinctive effort to maintain the denial, and Belle gave it up for ever. For a moment she looked into the kind dark eyes, bent in true concern upon her, and then hid her face in her hands.

"And if it be so? Will you tell me how I am to help it?"

"But, my dear child—look up, Belle; this is serious. If you do not make head against this, it will make head against you."

"Do you see that I am looking very ill?" she asked.

"Yes, I do. It did not strike me until to-day."

"Do you think that I am dying?"

"Oh, Belle, you should not say foolish things!"

"But I feel like it."

She was looking at him now earnestly, and he at her; her sad eyes wore a strangely peculiar light.

"There's nothing to live for. I have felt that since—you know; and now that mamma is gone, there is less and less. But it is not that, Thomas. Though life had everything to make me wish to stay in it, to strive to stay, I feel that it would be of no use. It is drifting away from me."

"It is wrong of you to think this."

"But if it be so, and if I cannot help feeling and knowing that it is so, where's the wrong then?" she persisted.

"Are you conscious of any malady?"

"No, not of body. I lose strength, and I grow thinner and thinner; that's all."

"Then why should you feel that you are dying?"

"I don't mean dying yet. Only that I shall never get up again and be as I once was—as other people are. Thomas, will you believe that I have come to long for death? Heaven only knows what I have gone through—what my pain has been."

"You told me a minute ago that you had no pain."

"Neither have I of body—except the cough."

He took her left hand very tenderly within his, and stroked it, as a mother might soothe a sick child. The right hand was raised, shading her face.

"The pain and anguish are killing me, Thomas. I cannot help it. Indeed, I did try to take your advice to throw things off, and to forget gradually; but I could not do it. I'm afraid I was not strong, and it has worn me out."

"You must make a true, earnest, *prayerful* effort, once for all, and rally."

"I have not prayed to rally. I have prayed for death—but only if God pleases. There is no sin in that. I believe He sees that I could not live on with my broken heart."

"Hearts don't break so easily, my dear girl. I once thought mine had snapped right asunder, but I fancy it is whole yet."

She shook her head sadly.

"It has been breaking ever since that time—breaking and breaking; night and day, night and day. I did not think any

one could go through what I have, and live. I could not go through it again."

"I am afraid, Belle, this state of mind is sinful," he rejoined, really not knowing what to say that would make any impression on her.

"I hope not. The horrible pain is upon me always, Thomas; always. It is wearing out my heart; it is killing me; it prevents any desire to live. If the pain were lifted off me—and oh, how willingly I would lift it if I could!—then I should be happy again, and wish to live on; but I cannot lift it; it is not in my power: instead of leaving me, it seems only to grow more real. Don't you see? I and my will are, as it were, helpless."

"Yes, I see," he murmured, his tone partaking of the pain she spoke of.

"It is making me wish for death, Thomas. There can be no other relief. Oh, I know how good you are, and how good Lady Kage was; but don't blame me; please don't blame me!"

"Blame you!" he interjected feelingly.

"And sometimes I think that God is not blaming me; that He is sending all this in love. I was such a wicked girl, you know; doing what I could to plague my mother, to ridicule and annoy every one. It was well that punishment should come to me—that I should see my sin. With heaven in view, Thomas, it seems like sin now."

"*Is* heaven in view?"

"I think it must be," she softly said. "I think God means me to see it, and to long for it. I have taken lately to dream of being in the sweetest place; where the sense of perfect rest is upon me, and pain and tears are over. The light is beautiful, softer and brighter than anything on earth, and the flowers are sweeter. It is heaven, nothing less. When I wake up, and my real pain rushes back on me, I stretch out my arms feebly to God, and ask Him to please to take me to it. I think He will."

Thomas Kage sat for an instant in silence. This was difficult to deal with.

"Listen to me, Belle. If you mean that you really and

truly think you are in danger of death, it must be seen to. We must call a consultation."

"A consultation! *It would be worse than useless.* What I am suffering from is nothing within the scope of a physician. I am just drifting out of life without any malady—except that of a broken heart."

"But——"

"Thomas, believe me," she earnestly pursued, "nothing can be done for me; there is no disease to work upon. If you called in all the doctors in London, they could say no more than that. Dr. Tyndal sees me every other day: he will preach to you by the hour about want of 'tone,' and spring's deceitful winds, and young ladies' fancies; and finally tell you there's nothing else the matter with me. Go and ask him. Many a girl has suffered, and wasted away to death as I am wasting, and the doctors have never known what she died of. It is not their skill that is in fault."

"Granted; but——"

"And mind, Thomas, you must not speak of this: you know that there's no one else in the wide world that I would breathe it to. I could not have told you but for what you disclosed to me that night. We——"

A servant came in, bringing the cards of visitors. Not seeing his mistress, he presented them to Miss Annesley. "Yes, I suppose they must come up," she answered, wishing the house was her own, so that she could be denied.

As the man left the room again, she cast her eyes carelessly on the cards, and started up with a faint cry. Thomas Kage went to look.

Captain Dawkes—Mrs. Dawkes.

Since the inauspicious marriage (if you knew all, my reader, you would indorse the word) of Mr. and Mrs. Dawkes the previous November, they had chiefly resided at the Rock. Mrs. Kage recovered in a degree from her attack of paralysis, but only to be more battered in look than ever, more dilapidated in constitution; and to pay her a visit daily Mrs. Dawkes found an intolerably wearisome task.

How Captain Dawkes contrived to reassure his wife on the score of his accredited ill-doings, he best knew: woman is

credulous, and man is wary. He did contrive to do it; and after the accusations in the vestry, Mrs. Dawkes heard no more. Those who would have spoken the truth to warn her from the man, found their lips sealed as soon as he had become her husband. If Mrs. Dawkes had cause for any suspicion, it was confined to her own breast. She had committed the great imprudence of marrying without having her available money settled on herself, and if Captain Dawkes made free with it, why, the law would have said it was his own to do with as he pleased.

They went in for a great deal of show and expense; and the captain was a gentleman at large again, to display his face in the London world at will, and get as much credit as he chose. He had repurchased into the army, and was altogether grand. Their London house, the lease of it bought recently, was one of the most fashionable mansions in Belgravia; and Captain and Mrs. Dawkes had now come up to take possession of it, with the intention of being a very fashionable couple. Caroline had always loved show and glitter; and it may be that she loved it all the better since her heart had grown a little seared with a certain blight Fate had cast upon it. But for the cold spring, and the rather delicate health of little Tom Canterbury, Mrs. Dawkes had been up before May. The captain had been a good deal away from the Rock himself, pleading his soldier's duties. However, here they were now in London, and had come to make a call on Mrs. Richard Dunn.

The crimson flush of emotion burning in Belle Annesley's cheeks was already fading to an ashy whiteness. She had started up to quit the room, but the sound of voices and steps outside the door cut off her escape. Thomas Kage laid his restraining hand upon her in calm composure, and it almost seemed to give her strength.

"Be still, Annabel. You have nothing to do but keep quiet. I will shield you."

And as if to receive the visitors, Mr. Kage placed himself before her. Mrs. Dunn unconsciously helped matters by coming in at the moment. There was greeting and much talking; and it was only when they separated to place themselves in chairs that the invalid girl in her deep mourning was perceived.

"Ah, Miss Annesley!—how are you?" said the captain, putting out his hand as coolly as though he had never played fast and loose with her.

Caroline took a step forward in curiosity when she heard the name. She had never seen Belle Annesley, but she could not forget that it had been said she was Barnaby Dawkes's love. Barnaby, when asked about it by his wife in private, had burst out laughing at the very idea; had made game over it, game also of Belle. But Mrs. Dawkes was curious, nevertheless; and she came across the room to see.

Belle had risen. A fragile girl, with a mass of golden hair, and a transparent face whose delicate cheeks were shining with a hectic glow. But if Caroline had been calling up incipient ideas of jealousy, they went out at once as she stood; for there was something about the girl that seemed to say she was not very long for this world, and Caroline's heart filled itself with a wondrous pity.

"Sarah, is this your cousin?" she asked, calling Mrs. Dunn by the old familiar Christian name.

"Yes. Miss Annesley, Mrs. Dawkes."

The two had stood looking at each other, apparently waiting for the introduction, or Mrs. Dunn had surely never been so formal as to make it. She felt a little confused herself, remembering what Barnaby Dawkes's conduct had been. Belle sat down again, her bosom heaving and fluttering; the hectic fading out of the cheeks. Thomas Kage moved near her; the captain crossed over and took a chair by Mrs. Dunn.

"I cannot think how it is we never met during the six months that I passed in London, when my boy was a baby," began Caroline, who seemed as if she could not take her eyes off the sick girl. "I feel quite sure I never saw you. We called twice on Sarah—who was then staying with your mamma—but I do not remember you at all."

Belle cast her thoughts back, to the time spoken of by Mrs. Dawkes, in a kind of transient shame. Too well she remembered that spring! It was in the very height of her thoughtless and flirting days, when she had no care for aught save her admirers. The advent of Barnaby Dawkes and his love had not dawned then.

"I must have happened to be out when you came," she replied. "I know I once went with mamma and Sarah to call on you in Belgrave Square, but you and Mr. Canterbury were not at home. I was very young then, and mamma did not take me out much. But I saw you once, Mrs. Dawkes."

"Ah, you mean in the old, old days when we were little mites of children, and you came down to Chilling Rectory on a visit. That was just after mamma settled at the place. Of course we saw each other then."

"No. I meant when you were in town. You had been calling upon Mrs. Garston, and Mr. Canterbury was putting you into the carriage. I stood inside the gate and watched you away; but you did not notice me," added Belle, losing herself in the reminiscence.

"You don't seem well," said Caroline, a little abruptly. And the remark seemed to scare Belle's senses away.

Thomas Kage came to the rescue, speaking quietly. "I was just telling Miss Annesley that her cough was making her look ill and thin; but she says she had it last year, and only got strong when the warm weather came in. It has been a late spring."

"It has not been much of a spring at all, down with us," observed Caroline, playing with her watch-chain, and never looking at him as she spoke. Face to face with Thomas Kage, it could not be but that remembrance should lie upon *her*. "Little Tom has had a cough too; they think his chest is weak."

"Have you brought him to town?" asked Mr. Kage.

"What a question, Thomas!" she answered, with a laugh that seemed not to be very real. "As if I should go anywhere without my boy! You'll come and see him, will you not?"

"Certainly."

"Mamma says I had a delicate chest myself when I was a child; she was always afraid for me. Papa died of consumption. But I grew up to be strong and well, and I don't see why Tom should not."

"The boy has always seemed to me a particularly healthy child," observed Mr. Kage. "Though small and slightly formed, he is quite sound."

"Of course he is," acquiesced Caroline. "Captain Dawkes says sometimes that Tom is *not* strong, but I am sure it is all fancy."

"Shall you make a long stay in town?"

"Until August, I suppose. I want to spend September on the Rhine. By the way, can you tell me whether Mrs. Dunn is in London? Lydia Canterbury, you know."

"She is."

"The Miss Canterburys are abroad still. Austin Rufort and his wife came back to the Rectory just as we left Chilling. I did not see them; we crossed each other on the road."

"The Miss Canterburys are in London, staying with their sister, Mrs. Dunn," spoke Thomas Kage. "I seem to know more about your family than you do, Mrs. Dawkes," he added, with a slight laugh.

Mrs. Dawkes bit her pretty lip. She did not like his calling her "Mrs. Dawkes," or the coolly civil indifference that characterized his tone and manner, as if she could never be an object of the smallest interest to him henceforth for ever. Neither did she care to hear that the Miss Canterburys were in London. A sense of the wrong inflicted on her late husband's daughters lay dormant in a remote corner of her heart; the sight of them invariably woke it up, and Caroline would rather have been spared the meeting.

"Oh, staying with Lydia Dunn, are they? Do they look well?"

"I have not seen them, Mrs. Dawkes."

"Mrs. Dawkes" again! Mrs. Dawkes drew her chair round, and joined in the conversation with her husband and Mrs. Richard Dunn.

But Captain and Mrs. Dawkes soon rose. Perhaps neither felt quite at ease in the present company. In the movement —the slight bustle of the farewells—Captain Dawkes had an unobserved moment behind with Belle. Clasping her fragile hand within his, so warm with strong life, he bent his face until it nearly touched hers, speaking in a sweet and tender whisper—

"Do not blame me until you know how I was tried. The misery has been worse to me than to you. Heaven bless you, Belle!"

And when Thomas Kage came back across the room to say his own adieu after they had disappeared, he wondered what had come to Belle Annesley. Her blue eyes were shining as with the light of love; the dead weariness had momentarily left her face; and her cheeks were bright with a soft rose-colour.

CHAPTER XXV.

AT THE FESTIVE BOARD.

The crowded and prolonged season gave no signs yet of drawing to a close. If the spring had been cold and dull, the summer was lovely. London was very full; Hyde Park shone with beauty; frivolity reigned everywhere. Amidst the gayest of the gay were Captain and Mrs. Dawkes. In their fine mansion in Belgravia, they reigned a king and queen of fashion, entertaining frequently the world, regardless of cost. From the state and expense kept up, by the way in which the money was squandered right and left, it might have been thought their purse was without end. There's an old saying, "Lightly come, lightly go;" and both were new to riches. The most absurd stories of Mrs. Canterbury's wealth had flown about, and society deemed her revenues to be at least regal. Possibly in her inexperience she fancied them so herself.

The captain was in clover. Unlimited wealth, and a high position amongst his fellow-men, had been the dream of his ambition from boyhood. A dream of fancy, however, rather than of hope; for Barnaby Dawkes had never thought to be more wealthy than Mrs. Garston's money would have made him. And, even that he had not looked upon as a certainty. Although Keziah and others had told him he was sure to succeed to the old lady's inheritance, in his own heart there had always lain a doubt of it. She herself had never led him to expect it—never by a single hint; on the contrary, words had many a time fallen from her lips from which he knew he might draw a totally opposite deduction. And therefore Mr.

Barnaby could never in reality plead expectations as an excuse for the spendthrift ways he took up. But what was Mrs. Garston's moderate wealth compared with this that he had come into by his marriage with Mrs. Canterbury? Barnaby Dawkes estimated that, now, much as he did a few ashes from his cigar. He could at length afford to snap his fingers at the old lady; and did so metaphorically.

To marry Barnaby Dawkes was an imprudent step of Mrs. Canterbury's; to marry him in the haste she did, and without any sort of settlement, was terrible. For, by so doing, all moneys, not secured to her separate use by her first husband, passed into his power. Reviewing this desirable fact in his mind whilst he shaved, the morning after his marriage, complacently regarding himself in the glass, the captain called it a "godsend." Possibly: but he had not the sense to foresee that to a man of his lavish tastes and self-indulgent habits it might prove a dangerous one. He paid his debts,—more, were they, than the world or Keziah knew of; he repurchased into a crack corps; he flung money about as inclination dictated, without the slightest stint; and he and his wife, quitting the Rock, set up their gorgeous tent in Belgravia for the season, to live on the scale of princes.

They were a fashionable couple in other respects as well; politely indifferent to each other, rather than cordial. That Caroline had found out her mistake in marrying him, was only too probable; and the very listlessness in which her days were passed caused her to enter the more eagerly into gaiety. If she repented, she did not show it; woman-like, she buried it within her breast: and talked, and dressed, and laughed, and was the gayest of the gay. She liked the life; possessing, in point of fact, an innate genius for it.

A late breakfast in the morning, she and Barnaby lounging over it together, glancing at their plans for the day, and picking out the most agreeable ways of killing time; very fine and fashionable both, in look and manner and speech, and intensely heartless; he away afterwards, she devouring some charming novel; a few select morning callers; a grand luncheon, taken nearly always in company; next the real visiting and being visited; then going out to buy dress and

flowers and sweetmeats—anything attractive that shops can display; the Park later; dinner (always a sumptuous one), out or at home; the opera and evening assemblies; and to bed with the morning sunlight. This was the life; it was, in fact, nothing but a whirlwind of excitement, and both Captain and Mrs. Dawkes thought it paradise. He, of course, had other pursuits—billiards and wine-drinking and gambling.

But it is not entirely of Captain and Mrs. Dawkes that this chapter must treat. Looking on at all this extravagance and gaiety were the inmates of a house in a less fashionable quarter, but not so very far removed either; and that was Mrs. Dunn's, of Paradise Square. Mrs. Dunn had her two sisters staying with her—Olive and Millicent Canterbury. It was natural that they should see all this lavish waste of money, *their* money, with grievous heartburning. Yes, their money; they could only look upon it as theirs still of right, for they had been born to it. Who were these strangers, these interlopers, Caroline Dawkes and Barnaby her husband, that they should be revelling in the sisters' birthright? Olive and Millicent did not suffer their lips to put the question even to each other. Mrs. Dunn, less reticent, asked it a dozen times a day. But, like many another bitter wrong, it had to be endured, for there was no remedy; and two of them at least strove to make the best of it.

The two houses kept up a show of friendship. Stay; not friendship, acquaintanceship. Miss Canterbury willed it so. It was better, she urged; and, after all, what good would be gained by showing resentment? Millicent, following her eldest sister's lead always, acquiesced without a word. Mrs. Dunn grumblingly yielded; not to comply with Olive's advice, but because in her curiosity she would see a little farther into Captain and Mrs. Dawkes, and Captain and Mrs. Dawkes's ménage. So a call had been exchanged twice or thrice, and now there was going to be a dinner. Caroline felt a sort of uneasiness in their presence always, her husband none. Indeed, he personally could not be charged with offence to them.

The fine June day was drawing, like the month itself, to a close, as Keziah Dawkes picked her way across the watered

streets of Belgravia to her brother's residence. However gratified Barnaby Dawkes might be with the substantial results of his marriage, Keziah was less so. In the abstract she had not wished her brother to marry at all. She felt, to this hour, the keen pang that shot across her heart the evening that he had first spoken of Belle Annesley as his possible future wife; for Keziah loved him jealously. But when Barnaby cast his covetous eyes on the wealthy Mrs. Canterbury, and sent for Keziah to help him to scheme to get her, she had entered into it with her whole spirit. What precise good Keziah pictured to result from it for herself she never said, but she certainly looked for a great deal. And she was feeling disappointed; for as yet the good had not come. To be welcomed as an inmate of this Belgravian mansion, she had confidently anticipated; but she had not got there yet. In point of fact, Mrs. Dawkes did not like Keziah, and she told her husband that she would not have her there. Keziah thought he might have taken the reins into his own hands; and she intended to suggest it to him. Reaching the door, she gave a knock and then a ring; and a smart footman, in the smart Canterbury livery, appeared.

"Is Captain Dawkes at home?"

"No, mem."

"Mrs. Dawkes?"

"Mrs. Dawkes has not come in yet, mem. There's nobody within but Mrs. Kage."

Keziah felt a little surprised.

"Mrs. Kage! Is she here?"

"She come up three or four days ago, mem," said the man. "I think she is in her room, a-being dressed for dinner."

"I will wait," said Keziah.

Making herself at home in the house, as she chose always to do, she turned into the dining-room. The table was already laid, and for several people.

"There's a dinner-party, I see," observed Keziah, quickly, the beautiful glass and silver glittering in her eyes like so many diamonds.

"Not much of a party, mem; a family assemblage, I believe," answered the servant, who minced his words affectedly,

like some of his betters. "The Misses Canterburys is to dine with us, and one or two more."

Keziah passed into a small room that her brother called "his study." Pipes and pistols, and similar curiosities, lay about; but of materials for other kinds of study there appeared to be none. She sat down by the window, which had a lively prospect of the back yard.

"When my brother comes in, say that I am waiting here to see him," she said.

And the man left her.

Captain Dawkes and his wife arrived together. He had been driving her in the Park. As Mrs. Dawkes passed upstairs, the servant delivered the message to his master.

"Well, Keziah," said the captain, beginning to unbutton his gloves slowly as he entered.

Keziah shook hands with him. Since the marriage her manners had become, perhaps unconsciously, more formal. Time was when her only greeting to him had been a loving kiss.

"I have been waiting in for you every evening for a week past, Barnaby," she began, some resentment in her tone. "You promised to come and talk one or two things over with me."

"Awfully sorry for it," said the captain, with a great show of repentance. "Haven't been able to come, 'pon honour."

Keziah took her bonnet-string in one hand and stroked it with the other—a habit she had when in deep thought—whilst her eyes were fixed reproachfully on Barnaby. "The matters must be talked of between us, Barnaby, for my sake, if not for yours. I have never thought but of you through life; but I—I must consider myself a little now."

"To-morrow, or next day, I'll come for certain, Keziah. We get up awfully late here, and the morning's gone before one can look round."

"I suppose that is a consequence of your going to bed late?" said Keziah, alluding to the getting up. "I am out of my bed at eight every morning in the year."

"Jolly freezing that, in winter!" remarked the gallant captain. "Look here, you'll stay dinner. Go up and take your bonnet off."

"You have a party to-day, and I am not dressed for it."

"A party? no. The Canterburys and Dunns and Tom Kage. Don't think there'll be anybody else. No need of particular dress for them."

"I did think you would have asked me to come here and stay a few days with you, Barnaby," she broke forth, the sore feeling finding vent at last. "It would be a relief after my poor lodgings."

"Fact is, Caroline objects to have people staying with her," spoke the captain, with indifference.

"*You* might invite *me*."

"I'll see later. No time to think about things. Hands full of engagements always. You'll stay to dinner though?"

"Barnaby, do you ever look back to the old days," she asked in low tones, her grey hard face bent forward with an expression of intense pain, "when you and I struggled on together, with very few comforts and no dainties, and you went in fear of your liberty? Do you ever recall that time?"

"Why, on earth, should I?" demanded the captain. "I'm only too glad to send it amidst the bygones. What's the matter with you, Keziah?"

The matter with her! Keziah Dawkes was only learning the hard lesson that many another woman has had to learn. His turn served, the wealth and position he had coveted his at last, Barnaby Dawkes's entire selfishness displayed itself in its true colours. He cared no more for the sister who had sacrificed so much for him than he did for the rest of the world. Self it had been always with Barnaby; self it would be to the end.

"I did think you might have liked to have me for a short time in your house, Barby, now that you have one worth coming to," she said, a little plaintively.

"Ah—tell you, got no time to think about it just now, Keziah," was the supremely independent answer. "Such a lot to do in town always. You shall come and stay with us at the Rock."

A gracious promise apparently, but not a sincere one. Barnaby's private belief was that his wife would no more have Keziah at the Rock than she would in Belgravia. For himself

it was a matter of almost perfect indifference; of the two, he would rather prefer Keziah's room to her company.

"Oh, Barnaby! what a splendid diamond!"

Captain Dawkes did most things with the drawling slowness of a man of fashion, and he had by this time got off one of his gloves. A diamond on the third finger of his right hand flashed in the light.

"Rather nice," acquiesced the captain, listlessly, as if diamonds were as common with him now as debts once were. "It's a little too large: got to wear it on this finger; shall have it taken in."

"It must have been a priceless diamond," remarked Keziah.

"No; cheap, for what it is. Gave three hundred and fifty for it. Saw it by accident at Garrard's the other day, and nailed it on the spot. Ordered a set of studs to match; doubt if they'll get 'em as fine as—— My dear, what's the matter?"

For Mrs. Dawkes had come into the room in a sort of commotion. She did not at first see Keziah, and began to speak very rapidly. "Did you ever *know* anything like mamma? She says she is going to dine at table, and is being got up for it in a low dress. Oh, how do you do, Keziah?"

"I was telling Keziah to take her bonnet off and stay to dinner," remarked the captain. "Not dressed for it, she answers: as if that mattered!"

"Oh, don't think of your dress," said Caroline, graciously. "But about mamma, Barnaby; what's to be done?"

"Let her dine at table if she wants to," was Barnaby's comment.

"But she'll look—she'll look—such an object," returned Mrs. Dawkes, hesitating to apply the word to her mother, but finding no ready substitute.

"And if she does?" said the easy captain. "There'll be no strangers."

Mrs. Dawkes and Keziah went upstairs together. The latter unbuttoned her mantle, and glanced at her tight-fitting brown-silk dress. Good of its kind, but not quite the thing for a dinner-party. Keziah Dawkes, however, had outlived the age of vanity. She never possessed much; all hers had been concentered in her handsome brother. She went and sat in the

drawing-room alone, and there waited for the appearance of the company, indoor and outdoor. What a beautiful room it was! Keziah was engaged in a mental calculation as to how many hundreds of pounds the furniture and fittings-up had cost, when her attention was attracted by the entrance of Mrs. Kage.

Keziah's eyes took a startled stare of surprise, and she drew back involuntarily. Was it indeed Mrs. Kage? or some poor puppet fantastically attired to frighten the world? Sure such a painted face was never seen in connexion with paralysis! For the remains of that seizure were still upon her: the legs were uncertain, the arms shook, the mouth twitched frequently. Fry, the maid, dragged rather than led her across the room to a seat. Keziah, in her humanity, went up and helped.

"Oh dear! much obliged—who is it?" asked the poor cracked jerking voice, and the dim eyes looked up; eyes too near their final closing to be tricked out as they were with belladonna.

"It is I—Keziah Dawkes. I am glad to see you can be about again, Mrs. Kage."

"Oh, I'm quite well, thank you; quite blooming. Fry, where are you putting me?"

Fry and Keziah were putting her into the easiest and safest chair they could find, one with large elbows; from an unsafe one she might have tumbled out. Oh, what a mockery it was! That bedizened face: the flowers and feathers nodding on the head that was never still; the bare neck with its thin black lace covering; the jangling beads on the skeleton wrists! When Mrs. Kage should be attired for her coffin, lying in it at rest, she would be more seemly to the eye than she was now. Fry had scarcely settled her, or finished picking up the fans and scent-bottles that would keep falling from her hands and lap, when Mrs. Dawkes entered—a lovely vision she, in pearls and blue satin. Something like dismay rose to her beautiful face.

"Fry! how could you think of bringing mamma here?" came the vexed question. "She should have been taken at once to her place at table."

"She wouldn't go, ma'am," answered Fry. "She would not hear of it."

"But how is she to be got down when the people are here? Mamma"—bending low her face to the palsied one—"you had better go to the dinner-table at once, it will be more comfortable for you."

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Kage, shrilly. "I am going down with the rest; I am not a child. Oh, the ingratitude of daughters! After I have schemed for you, Caroline, to put you in your beautiful position, and got you loads of wealth, and——"

"There, there, mamma; that will do. Fry, pour some eau-de-Cologne on mamma's hands."

Mrs. Kage was ever ready for scent in any shape, and the "pouring it on her hands" drew her attention from undesirable reminiscences. Caroline, biting her pretty lips, walked to the window and looked out. She was just in time to see the stoppage of Mrs. Dunn's carriage underneath. One, the first to step from it, caused her heart to thrill even then; it was Thomas Kage. He turned round to give his hand to the rest. Millicent Canterbury jumped lightly down; Olive came next; Lydia Dunn last. Captain Dawkes, entering the room close behind them, found himself pulled gently by the coat-tails.

"May I come in, papa?"

"No, certainly not," growled the captain, angrily. "We don't want you, sir. Be off back!"

The child—it was little Tom Canterbury—shrank away timidly. He had his mother's blue eyes and her fair hair. Mr. Kage, who had lingered a moment to give Mrs. Dunn's footman his directions, came just in the boy's way, and stretched out his arms playfully on either side to make a barrier. They were alone on the landing. Something like a sob burst from Tom.

"Why, my little fellow, what is it?"

"Papa won't let me go in; he is always cross now. Mamma is there, and I've got to go away to the nursery."

"I'll take you," said Mr. Kage. "We'll go together."

Picking up the child in his arms, he carried him up the stairs very tenderly. Some instinct whispered to him that Captain Dawkes's show of love before marriage for this unfortunate child had faded into air. In point of fact it was so; Captain Dawkes was not deliberately harsh or cruel to the

boy—his wife would not have permitted that; but he was coldly indifferent, sometimes very cross. Judith, the nurse, sat in the nursery, mending a pinafore.

"Back again, Master Tom! I knew it was of no good your asking."

She turned round, saw Mr. Kage, and rose. The little boy ran to a box of bricks, and began showing Mr. Kage what a good house he could build. They were the best of friends, rare though their meetings were; and Mr. Kage never failed to bring some delightful book to please the child's eye or ear. He drew one from his pocket now, and took the boy on his knee. Tom—he was always gentle—pressed his little hands together with delight at the first picture.

"What's that, Mr. Kage? An angel?"

"I never see such a child," interposed Judith, in a superstitious whisper. "He's always wanting to talk of angels and heaven, sir; one would think they had called him to go up there."

"Well, this is an angel," said Thomas Kage, smiling pleasantly. "See, Tom—he is standing at the top of the ladder; and Jacob is asleep at the foot, with his head on the hard stone."

"Does the ladder reach right up into heaven?" asked little Tom.

"Right up. And the angels, though we cannot see them, Tom, will help us all to climb it in our turn."

"I dream of the angels sometimes," said Tom; "I like to."

"Just hark at him!" interjected Judith to herself.

"Nobody tells me about them but you," said Tom. "I wish you'd come here oftener."

"I have to stay at home and work," said Mr. Kage. "Ask mamma to tell you."

"Mamma says she has no time."

"You audacious little Turk, taking mamma's name in vain!" interposed a fond voice at this juncture; and the child slid off Thomas Kage's knee to fly to it. Caroline clasped him in her arms, kissing him passionately. *Her* love for him could not fade or weaken. With a laughing apology for not speaking to him at once, she held out her hand to Mr. Kage.

"I thought I might find you here. But what kind of manners do you call it, sir, to pay your respects to Mr. Tom before you pay them to me?"

"He waylaid me on the stairs, and I carried him up here."

"Papa would not let me go into the drawing-room. I wanted you, mamma."

"Not let you! Nonsense, Tom! Dinner's not quite ready; you shall go down with me."

"I don't care now," dissented Tom. "I've got a book with some angels in it. Mr. Kage gave it me."

"You are very kind to him," exclaimed Caroline, a mist of gratitude rising to her eyes. "I think you wish to be a true friend to him."

"It is what I mean to be, Heaven permitting me."

Tom sat down on the carpet, picture-book in lap, and Mrs. Dawkes and her cousin descended the stairs together, her vain glance lingering in any mirror they happened to pass. Thomas Kage had rejected her for his wife; but she liked to look her best in his eyes, for all that. Whether she were more vain of herself or her precious boy, it would have puzzled Mrs. Dawkes to tell.

"He is a queer little darling," she suddenly said. "Fancy his staying up there from choice, to 'look at the angels'!"

"He could not look at better things, Caroline."

"Oh, of course not. I think it must have been you who first gave him the fancy. Judith says he would always be talking of angels and heaven."

"I think, in these rare cases, it is Heaven itself that gives it," gravely spoke Mr. Kage. "Caroline, are you doing your duty by him?"

The question sounded rather an abrupt one. Mrs. Dawkes turned her face to the speaker. "My duty!"

"I mean in the higher sense of the word. A child should be trained to think of these solemn things. Are you training him?"

"Thomas, how old-fashioned you are! What do I know of angels, more than any one else knows?"

His good dark eyes rested for a moment upon hers. That she certainly knew next to nothing, had never been taught to know, he was only too well aware of.

"The child has just said to me, talking of angels, 'Mamma has no time to tell me about them.' Caroline, you must make time. It is the solemn duty of every mother to endeavour to train her child for heaven."

"I wish you wouldn't preach as though you were in a pulpit, Thomas. I do train him. He says his prayers, and all that. One would think you feared I meant him to be a heathen!"

"His father is dead; you alone are left. If Mr. Canterbury can look down on this world, Caroline, think what his grief and agony might be at seeing his little son left untaught. The training of children is the most solemn duty that can be assigned to us in this world. Very few fulfil it as they ought."

"How earnest you are in this!" she involuntarily exclaimed.

"Because my mother trained *me*," he whispered. "Caroline, for your boy's sake, I beseech you look to it."

Mr. and Mrs. Richard Dunn had arrived when they got back to the drawing-room; also two gentlemen invited by Captain Dawkes. The butler was coming up to announce dinner.

"Mind, Thomas, you go in with me," said Mrs. Dawkes, hurriedly, as she went forward to shake hands with Sarah Dunn.

"And your young inmate, Belle Annesley?" she asked. "I wrote word that we hoped to see her."

"She is past going out to dinner now, Caroline," was Mrs. Dunn's answer. "She gets weaker and weaker."

"Poor girl! When does she start for the West Indies?"

"I fear, never. I fear she will not live for it."

"Is she so ill as that?" exclaimed Caroline, all sympathy. "What can have induced it?"

Mrs. Dunn said nothing. Her eyes chanced to meet those of Thomas Kage: both could have answered what, had they chosen.

After all, Thomas Kage did not take first place, as proposed. There appeared to be so much difficulty in getting down Mrs. Kage and her fans, that he went to Fry's assistance. Her poor legs were dropping beneath her at every stair, but she was landed in safety. He took a seat by her; no one would have smoothed difficulties for her as he did; Caroline was tolerably content that it should be so, and bade another

gentleman to her side in his place. But a sharp cloud passed momentarily over her brow when she saw that Thomas Kage had Millicent Canterbury on his other hand, and that they appeared to be on terms of assured friendship.

What a display it was!—the fantastic, shaking puppet at the festive board, amidst the lights and flowers and gala dresses! A death's-head, more than anything else, by contrast looked she. The shaking fork rattled against the shaking teeth, the wine was spilled; and she, poor thing, strove to make a pretence of being juvenile with the rest, and tapped Thomas Kage's arm with her fan, and thought she was flirting with him. He did his best to cover her deficiencies, and had very little dinner for his pains; but she was a pitiable object, tottering on the edge of the grave.

Was it for *this* that she had schemed and plotted, and lost the favour of good men? Had her grasping and her basely-acquired wealth brought her no other or better reward? The means and the end were in fitness with each other; and Mrs. Kage in horrible fitness with them.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MRS. GARSTON'S PURCHASE.

The streets were comparatively empty, comparatively cool; for the London great world had not yet come out to throng them, and the burning summer sun had scarcely attained to its midday heat. Traversing the pavement, with the deliberate step of one who talks as he goes, was Thomas Kage; and by his side a young lady, whose gentle face and cool muslin dress were equally pleasant to look upon. Never saw man a nicer face than hers; for it was Millicent Canterbury's. Miss Canterbury and Lydia Dunn were in advance. Take it for all in all, the days of Mr. Kage were greatly occupied just now; on this, the day after Mrs. Dawkes's dinner, he would be very busy. Labour always accumulated when he prepared to depart on circuit; and for once in his life he had lately been

striving to unite business with pleasure, for he went out a good deal with the Miss Canterburys. Accident in the first instance led to his doing so. Dining one evening at Mrs. Dunn's soon after the Miss Canterburys came on their visit to her, Olive happened to remark—in answer to a question of whether they had seen some show-place—that they did not go about as much as they would, in consequence of having no gentleman to accompany them; Mr. Richard Dunn, who was always kind and polite, being very much in Wales at his mines just now, and only running up occasionally. Upon that, Mr. Kage offered himself as Richard Dunn's substitute, and was with them as often as leisure permitted.

The expedition this morning was nothing formidable: only calling upon Mrs. Garston. That active lady, disregarding fashion's habits, preferred to see visitors literally in the morning; after ten o'clock she was ready for any who might call. At Mrs. Dawkes's dinner-table the previous evening, Mr. Kage, hearing that the Miss Canterburys purposed going there, had made a half-promise to come round and fetch them. He was living in his own home again, as a temporary arrangement. The friends who had tenanted it were gone, and Mr. Kage slept at home. He had now written to the landlord, saying he should resign it at the approaching expiration of the lease.

Absorbed in conversation, their steps lingered, and Olive and Mrs. Dunn were first at Mrs. Garston's gate. It did not surprise Thomas Kage to see the old lady with them, for she liked to pace her garden in fine weather. Leaning on her stick, her grey bonnet tilted a little forward on her head, she watched their approach with her keen eyes.

"So, Thomas Kage, you are taking holiday to-day!"

"Not whole holiday," was his answer, as he held out his hand to her. "I am going to my chambers by-and-by."

But the venerable lady did not respond to the movement. She despised the formality of hand-shaking, except when people met rarely. Thomas Kage was used to her, and did not think that the rejection meant any slight. Walking to a shady path, where two benches faced each other, Mrs. Garston seated herself, and they grouped themselves around her. It was within view

of that tree where poor Belle Annesley had leaned her aching head the day she met Keziah Dawkes and her cruel words.

"What makes you so late?" was Mrs. Garston's first question to Miss Canterbury.

"Do you call it late?" replied Olive. "I thought it early."

"Why, it is not twelve o'clock yet," put in Mrs. Dunn. "I said to Olive, coming along, that you would take us for Vandals."

Mrs. Garston's stick struck the smooth hard gravel. The latter speaker was no more in favour with her than she ever had been.

"I've never taken *you* for much else, Lydia Dunn. You'd go in for fashion and frivolity yourself, if you were not so restless. I wonder you come here."

"But I like to see you now and then," laughingly answered Mrs. Dunn, taking the reproach in good humour.

"Then behave yourself when you come, and don't talk false nonsense about the day's being early, when it's half gone. It is disrespectful to me, Lydia Dunn. I am old enough to be your grandmother, and with some years to spare."

"I wish we could bring our country habits with us to London, and find them welcome here," remarked Miss Canterbury, with a smile. "We are earlier there than even you, Mrs. Garston. Chilling is a primitive place."

"Earlier, are you?" returned the venerable dame. "I am down to breakfast every morning at nine o'clock, Olive Canterbury, and often in my garden at ten. And so you were out at dinner last night?"

"Yes; we dined with Mrs. Dawkes."

"With her who was Caroline Kage, and next Caroline Canterbury, and then went and made a fool of herself by marrying Barby Dawkes," commented the old lady. "Well, they are not ill-suited to each other; heartless frivolities, both of 'em. *You* had an escape there, Thomas Kage."

The colour flushed sharply into his face at the allusion; as was to all eyes perfectly visible, standing there with his back against the tree. Mrs. Garston lifted her stick, but not in wrath.

"You needn't redden up so, Thomas. Many a man as good

as you has had his fancy taken by a pretty girl—and his heart too. But you were too good for her; and I believe Heaven saw it, and spared you. Barby has got her; and she is too good for him. She'll find it out, too. Well, I didn't envy you your dinner last night."

"We did not envy ourselves," remarked Lydia Dunn. "It is never very pleasant to us to meet Caroline. The remembrance of certain wrongs recurs with more force at the sight of her."

"I don't mean on that account," retorted Mrs. Garston, with a few violent knocks. "No one supposes it would be pleasant; but if you choose to go in for it, you bring the consequences on yourselves, whether they are pleasure or whether they are pain. I spoke of Mrs. Kage. *I* should not like to sit down to dinner, and have a skeleton at the same table with painted cheeks and rattling bones! It would have upset my stomach."

Millicent laughed, somewhat irreverently. Olive lifted her finger in reproof, and turned to Mrs. Garston.

"You have heard about the dinner, then?"

"I have heard all about it. Early as you may consider it, Mistress Lydia Dunn, Keziah Dawkes was here more than an hour ago. She happened to call at Barby's yesterday, and they asked her to stay dinner."

"I don't like Keziah Dawkes at all," spoke Mrs. Dunn, with her usual blunt candour.

"You like her as well as I do, I'll lay," said Keziah's great-aunt. "She knows it too, and does not come here often—almost never, but when she wants anything. There's some trouble up about the money she advanced for Barby before his marriage; the people are claiming some of the charges twice over, and Barby has managed to lose the papers. Dare say he never kept them. Keziah came here to ask if I remembered a certain date."

"Keziah Dawkes always gives me the idea of being a thoroughly good sister," interposed Thomas Kage.

"She is that. She has been to Barby one in a thousand. Keziah Dawkes would sacrifice all the world to him, herself included; but she is hard-natured in the main—ill-conditioned

also. You should have heard her sneers this morning at Mrs. Kage. Why did they let a poor object like her dine at table?"

"I think Mr. Kage has most cause to ask that," said Lydia Dunn. "He had all the trouble of her."

"Had he! Serve him right. He gives enough trouble to other folk."

Of course the aspersion caused Thomas Kage to look up. His old friend was glaring at him with no sweet expression.

"What have I done now, dear Mrs. Garston?"

"Now, suppose you put that question to yourself, Thomas Kage. Just think over your actions the last day or two, and perhaps you needn't ask it of other people."

"I really do not know what you mean," he resumed, after a pause.

"Have you written a notice to your landlord to quit your house, or have you not?" she asked, lifting her stick in his face.

"I have done that. I told you that I should do it, Mrs. Garston."

"But I didn't suppose you were in earnest," she angrily said. "I never thought you'd have the heart to give up the house that your mother died in; or the face to abandon me. I thought better of you, Thomas Kage. What's the matter with the house? Answer me that."

"Not anything. If I were at all likely to settle in life, I should like none better. For me, a single man, it is a great expense, and I feel that I should scarcely be justified in renewing the lease."

"And leaving me counts for nothing, though I've been as good to you as a mother!"

"But I shall not leave you, dear Mrs. Garston. I can be with you just as much as though I lived next door."

Mrs. Garston's head was nodding ominously—not after Mrs. Kage's helpless fashion, but in anger. Thomas Kage had expected some such explosion; but he wondered how she had got to hear of the notice so speedily, since it was sent only the previous day.

"What are you thinking to do with your sticks and stones, pray?"

He did not answer for the moment, for the subject was rather a sore one. "Sticks and stones" that have been for years in our old homesteads can be parted from only with lively pain.

"Some of the furniture—it is not of much intrinsic value—I shall sell; and the articles that were prized by my mother must be warehoused," was his tardy answer. Anything but a satisfactory one to Mrs. Garston, who was bending forward to listen.

"Warehoused! You would warehouse the good old articles that were dear to your mother! I wonder what you'd call that, Thomas Kage? Sacrilege?"

"They shall be well taken care of, somehow," he murmured.

"And you'll sell the rest! Do you suppose there's anything among them that might suit me?" she resumed in a pleasanter tone. "Let us step in and have a look. I'm going to rebuild my coachman's house, and shall want furniture for it."

She went marching off with her stick, taking Thomas Kage's arm when he held it out to her. The rest followed. Mr. Kage smiled at the sudden invasion of his premises, and hoped they would be found in order. He need not have feared. Old Dorothy, in renewed health, was back again, and ruled over matters with a critical eye. Mrs. Garston, without the smallest ceremony, went from room to room until the whole house had been visited, making her comments aloud. All very disparaging comments, and tending to the point that it wanted "doing up."

"It is as I say—the place must be redone," she observed, coming to an anchor in the dining-room. "Just get a pencil and paper, Thomas Kage, and jot down what the landlord will have to do before it's taken by a fresh tenant."

"But—it will not be any business of mine," dissented Mr. Kage.

"Now you do as I bid you," she arbitrarily rejoined. "I know that landlord too well; and so do you, Lydia Dunn, I expect, for he is yours. He'll give a single coat of paint and a dab of varnish, and call a room done."

"I thought tenants had to make a house habitable at the expiration of a lease," interposed Miss Canterbury.

"That's as the lease may be worded," said Mrs. Garston. "Ours is the other way. Now then, Thomas Kage, where's that pencil and paper?"

Putting the paper before him without so much as a smile, he sat down to write what she desired: he had grown to obey her almost implicitly. It must be waste of time, he knew; and tedious, he feared, to the Miss Canterburys.

The house, she decided, was to be papered and painted throughout, and thoroughly renovated, all in the best style and manner; drains were to be looked to; a scullery, much wanted, should be built out at the back; the premises altogether made complete.

"Is that all?" asked Thomas Kage, looking up with a laugh as she came to an end.

"It's all I think of for the present," she answered. "How you and poor Lady Kage could have lived with this horrid red paper on the wall"-(striking it with her stick), "I can't think. And your mother had good taste in general, Thomas."

"We did not like the paper because it lighted up so badly; but it is handsome of its kind."

"Handsome of its kind! You may say that of a dancing-bear. If I had a red-papered room in my house, I should whitewash it over. Give me the list." As he handed it to her, she caught the look of smiling incredulity on his countenance. It a little annoyed her. "I see: you deem this quite useless. Waste of time, as you said just now."

"I am sure the landlord will never do as much, nor the half of it," he answered. "And in any case, dear Mrs. Garston, it cannot concern me."

"I'll answer for this much, Thomas Kage—that the landlord will do every item you've written down here. Whether it shall concern you or not—that is, whether you shall choose to stop on in the house, or whether you go out of it—it shall be put into proper repair."

"You must have made it a condition with him, then, in renewing your own lease."

"Never you mind whether I have or haven't; don't you be so fond of contradicting me. We will go back again now."

When they reached her garden, Mrs. Garston led the way

indoors to her own dining-room. Its beautiful paper of white and gold was cheerful to see in the midday sun. She called their attention to it. "This is the right sort of paper. I like large-looking rooms, and I like light ones; and you don't have either when the walls are red. This self-same pattern, if it can be got, shall be put into that parlour of yours, Thomas Kage."

"If you can get the landlord to do it," he answered, humouring her.

"The landlord happens to be myself."

The avowal took them by surprise. Mrs. Garston made it from her large chair, in which she had put herself; her grey bonnet was thrown back; her keen grey eyes sought theirs; her stick, held in both hands, gently tapped the carpet before her. Never did a more self-asserting old lady sit for a portrait. But if some doubt appeared in Thomas Kage's face, he might be pardoned. She saw it; perhaps had been watching for it.

"You would like to tell me to my face that I am asserting what is not true, Thomas Kage. What would your mother have said to such manners? *She* always trusted me. I have bought the house next door, and I have bought this. Now then!"

"I'm sure I am very glad to hear it," he murmured.

"I wished to buy them years ago: your mother knew that. But that landlord, scenting the wish, put such a price upon them that I wouldn't give it him. You have left me no resource now, Thomas Kage."

"I!"

"You. Don't you be insolent—staring at me as if I talked Dutch! Could I submit to the chance of having any sort of people next to me? And you said in my ear months ago, you know, that you should give up the house when the lease ran out. A travelling circus might have come and taken it, for all I could answer—the grounds are large. So I sent for the landlord, and said to him, 'Put on your own price;' which he did, and a nice price it was: but I paid it, and the property is mine."

"Dear me! that was going to work in a very costly manner," commented Mrs. Dunn, who could never refrain from interfering in other people's business.

Mrs. Garston rewarded her by a sharp reproof.

"It was my own affair, Lydia Dunn. If it had cost me ten times as much, I should have done it. Once my mind is set upon a thing, who is to say me nay?"

"But the waste of money?" persisted Lydia.

"Money! I've enough of *that*—more than I know what to do with sometimes. And now—a last word with you, Thomas Kage. Ah, you little thought when you penned that fine notice yesterday that it was coming to me. I wish you to remain on in the next house. I've bought it that you may do so; and whether you pay me rent, or whether you pay me none, is a matter of indifference to me. If I were to say I wouldn't receive any, your pride would rise up against it; so I don't say it. But I beg you to understand this one thing—if my wishes go for naught and you quit the house, it will remain empty, for I shall never suffer any other tenant to enter it whilst I live."

As if to give effect to the assertion, Mrs. Garston brought her stick down with a rap so emphatic that Millicent Canterbury, standing by the chair, started backwards. They rose to depart; the visit, including the time spent in the other house, had been unconscionably long, as Lydia Dunn expressed it. Thomas Kage, feeling rather bewildered, prepared to attend them. In going down the garden he found himself pulled back by Mrs. Garston. The others were well on in advance.

"You made a mistake once in your life, Thomas," she said. "Are you thinking to remedy it?"

"What mistake, Mrs. Garston?"

"In falling in love with that Kage girl. You see how she served you. Many a one before you has thrown away the kernel for the shell."

He smiled a little. What kernel?—what shell?

"She." And the stick was pointed at Millicent, who had turned round at the end of the path to wait. "If I can read countenances—and I used to do it—that girl is one of the best living. She would make you happier than the other ever would; ay, though you had married that one in the heyday of love."

He flushed a very little, laughing lightly.

"Millicent Canterbury must be as one forbidden to me, my dear old friend."

"And why?"

"She has ten thousand pounds. I have nothing; or next to nothing."

Never had Mrs. Garston been nearer going into a real passion than then. Her grey eyes flashed sparks on the speaker.

"Ten thousand pounds! and you nothing! Are you saying this to enrage me, Thomas Kage? It's false sophistry, every word of it. Though the girl, or any other girl, had ten times ten thousand, and you had but the coat and breeches you stood up in, you would be more than her equal. A husband such as you will make, a good man as your mother trained you to be, is worth, to the woman who gets him, a king's ransom. Ten thousand pounds!—ten thousand rubbish!"

Mortally offended, Mrs. Garston turned in and slammed the door in his face. He went forward with rather a conscious countenance.

"What is Mrs. Garston angry with you for?" asked Millicent.

"I said something that did not please her," he answered, glancing at the sweet eyes cast on him with unsuspicious inquiry.

For some little time now he had esteemed Millicent Canterbury above every one else in the world; not with that early passionate love that can touch man's heart but once, but with a far more lasting friendship. To what end? since, in spite of Mrs. Garston's anger, he did not look upon social problems exactly as she did.

"We must step out, Millicent. Your sisters are almost out of sight."

CHAPTER XXVII.

NOT QUITE HEARTLESS.

The window was thrown open to the summer sun, and a fire burnt in the grate. To every one but the poor sick invalid the heat seemed stifling. Richard Dunn, a fine portly man, mentally pronounced it to be so, as he paced the room with gentle steps. *She* was cold; and a suspicion was dawning on those around that it might be with the advancing shadow of death. She was passing away very gently. The painful adjuncts that too often attend even young girls to the grave spared Belle Annesley. The maid dressed her still, and combed out the soft curls of her pretty hair, and now and again tied a bit of ribbon in it. The cough had left her: there seemed absolutely nothing the matter with her but weakness. Wise Dr. Tyndal, paying his visit this morning, had declared to Mr. Dunn that if they could only fight against that, she might recover. But Mr. Dunn knew quite well that they could not fight against it. The child herself knew it. She really looked a child; more so than ever, in spite of the huge shawl that wrapped her up, and her black-and-white muslin dress. She lay back in the easy-chair, her feet on a footstool; the trembling fingers of her delicate hands plucking at the white handkerchief that lay in her lap. Richard Dunn, happening to notice the restless movement, and not liking it, stood still for a full minute regarding her.

"What is amiss with the handkerchief, Belle?"

"Nothing," she listlessly answered, pushing it aside. The next minute she had begun again—at the shawl this time. Mr. Dunn sat down by her, and took her hand in his.

"Do you feel worse, my dear?"

"No. Why?"

"You are very silent," he answered, by way of excuse.

"I was thinking. Thinking of the past. Of those old days, when I was so wild and heartless and wilful. They seem to be ages ago now."

"Past time often does, my dear."

"Always, I should think, to one like me—leaving the world for ever. I want you to say that you forgive me," she added in a whisper.

"Forgive you! What for?"

"Oh, you know. I did cause you pain in those days, and I caused it wilfully. A vain, mocking, ridiculing thing—that's what I was; nothing else. I—I don't care to recall it all in words; but I want you to say you forgive me."

Richard Dunn stooped over her and kissed her forehead. "My dear child, if there is anything you need forgiveness for, take it heartily: but I think you are fanciful to-day. I wish—I wish you had been spared to us. Sarah and I would have striven to make life pleasant to you."

"Thank you for all your kindness; thank you for ever." The trembling fingers, entwined in his, presently released themselves and began to work again. Mr. Dunn did not altogether like the signs. He left the room to find his wife. During the interval, little Tom Canterbury came in with his nurse.

When the boy had been taken down to dessert the previous evening at the dinner in Belgravia—for we have not got beyond the day spoken of in the last chapter—Mrs. Richard Dunn asked him to go to them on the following morning; and Judith was told to bring him. In the old days at Chilling, when Miss Annesley was the Rector's daughter, she had taken part in trying to teach Judith to read. The instruction, as previously hinted, had not come to much, but Judith was grateful all the same. During this present sojourn in London, she had occasionally, when not with her little charge, wound her way to Mrs. Richard Dunn's. Tom had grown to like to go there and to see Belle Annesley, between whom and himself a great friendship had arisen. In point of fact, it was Belle who, when her cousin was starting for the dinner-visit, had asked her to bid Tom come.

And so Judith and he had arrived, nothing loth. Tom wore his morning attire: a plaid dress reaching to the knees, his straight legs incased in little white socks. In the afternoon Mrs. Dawkes would have him decked out in velvets and

gewgaws; but Judith had her own way till then. A quiet, thoughtful child was he, whose disposition and temper were admirable. Belle Annesley kissed him; she took off his straw hat with her own fragile fingers, and stroked the falling curls of his light hair. Tom looked at her wistfully; it might be that he detected a change in her countenance, for a child sometimes sees signs hidden from older eyes.

"Lift him up, Judith."

There was ample room for the two on the large chair, and the boy was placed side by side with Belle. After considerable tugging, he succeeded in getting a book out of some mysterious under-pocket.

"I brought it for you to see," he said, as Judith left them to go and enjoy a gossip with Mrs. Dunn's nurse. "It has got an angel in it, and Jacob's ladder. Mr. Kage gave it me last night. Look: that's the angel, and that's the ladder, and its end is right up in heaven."

Belle Annesley's eyes were riveted on the picture with as much earnest interest as though she had been a child herself. Tom, waiting for sympathetic admiration, heard none.

"Isn't it pretty, Belle? I should like to be an angel."

Dropping the book, she clasped both his hands in hers. Her face and voice were alike strangely earnest. "We may both be so shortly, Tom. *I* shall. You may not be long after me."

The words were remarkable—taken in connection with what the hidden future was destined to bring forth. But the dying sometimes speak with a curious prevision.

Tom Canterbury, to judge by his eyes, did not know whether to be most awed or interested. Belle had fallen back in her chair, and was plucking at the shawl again. He thought his book neglected.

"Judith didn't want me to bring it, Belle. Mrs. Dunn said last night I was to come."

"Yes, I wished for you," answered Belle. "I thought you were not coming, though: it is nearly afternoon."

"Judith didn't get ready. She went in to help Fry with grandmamma."

Belle rose from her seat, and tottered to a desk that was on

a side-table, holding by the furniture as she went. Her strength for walking had almost passed away. Standing up before the desk, the shawl fell off her shoulders, and she looked like a shadow. The child got down with a jump and picked it up. She tottered back again, holding something in her hand. It was a beautiful little box of mother-of-pearl, made in the form of a shell, and inlaid with silver. Inside was a raised fretwork of silver enclosing a miniature painting in bright colours—a baby borne by two angels, who were gazing upwards. Sitting down, Belle put it into the boy's hand: the toy was so small, that his hand easily clasped it.

"My brother brought it for me, when he came over from the West Indies at mamma's death. Tom, I give it to you. You must keep it always for my sake."

Tom, opening the lid, stood entranced with admiration, oblivious of everything but the picture that so charmed him. He had an eye for bright colours, which were wont to give him strange delight.

"It's angels too," he said, breathlessly. "They are carrying the baby up to heaven."

"When you look at it sometimes after I am gone, Thomas, remember that they have carried me up there," she whispered.

"Do you like to go?" asked the boy, somewhat dubious on the point, now that it seemed to be coming to action.

"Yes."

"But wouldn't you like to stay here, and have playthings? Such things as this?"

"No, not now. It is so weary here."

She was feebly endeavouring to fold the shawl around her, and said no more. The little exertion had fatigued her; she lay back panting for a few moments, and then, as if it brought relief, her fingers were at work at the shawl again. Mrs. Dunn, who now entered, took in all the signs with a rapid, searching glance.

"Belle, my darling," she said, pushing the hair from the pale damp brow, "you seem a little restless."

"Do I?" returned Belle, with apathy. "I am very tired, Sarah."

Tired indeed! Sadly tired in body, and very tired with the

world and its cares. Poor Belle Annesley was dying, with all her trouble upon her—that unfortunate love for the man who had played her false. It racked her still; not as it had done, but more than was good for her comfort. One great wish lay ever upon her—that she could see him once again. It almost seemed to her that she could not die without it. Foolish, foolish girl! If her death, she thought, should but bring a pang of repentance to him, a bitter loving regret, why, then to herself it would be welcome. Sentiment clung to her to the last; and she wanted Barnaby Dawkes to see the wreck she had become for his sake. But she had not been able to call up the courage to ask for him.

It was to be, however. When Judith departed with little Canterbury, Mrs. Dunn went downstairs with them. She was standing for an instant at one of the front windows, and saw Thomas Kage pass. He had just left the Miss Canterburys at their door after that visit to Mrs. Garston. She made a sign to Mr. Kage, and he came in.

"Go up to her, Mr. Kage," she said, after telling him that both she and her husband fancied some change for the worse was approaching in Belle Annesley. "See what you think, and then come down and tell me; I'll wait here. Mr. Dunn has had to go out, but he will not be long."

When Mr. Kage entered the room, Belle had her eyes closed. He noticed the movement of the fingers spoken of by Mrs. Dunn. They were slowly at work. She gave a great start as he approached, and stared wildly.

"Oh, is it you?" she said in a minute, an accent of disappointment in her tone. "I—I—I think I had dozed and was dreaming."

"Of whom were you dreaming, Belle?" he asked, very gently, as he sat down near her and took one of her wasted hands in his.

The pale cheeks took a tinge of colour at the question; the blue eyes, getting a little glassy now, fell downwards. But she gave the true answer. She generally did give it to Mr. Kage. "I was dreaming of Captain Dawkes. I fancied he stood at that door talking to me; and when you came up, I—in the confusion of awaking—I really thought it was he."

"Would you like to see him, my dear?" asked Mr. Kage, after a pause.

Another faint flush of hectic.

"Perhaps he would not care to come. But—if he would, I should like to say good-bye to him."

"And how do you feel to day?" resumed Mr. Kage, changing the subject without comment. "Brave and strong?"

"Oh, I feel about the same," she answered listlessly. "I am very tired."

"It is a pity I disturbed your doze. And for nothing either, for I cannot stay. I have a hundred-and-one things to do to-day and to-morrow."

"But I shall see you again?" she said, as he stood up.

"Of course. I will come in this evening."

Happening to look back at her as he turned to close the door, Thomas Kage could only mark the eager, questioning, yearning look in the eyes that seemed to follow him. But still he said nothing about Captain Dawkes. That worthy gentleman might not choose to pay the visit, although bidden.

"Well, what do you think?" asked Sarah Dunn.

"I do not see much difference in her," was Mr. Kage's answer. "Nevertheless I think the end will not be very long delayed."

"Did you notice what I said about her fingers?"

"Yes. But I have seen the same thing in patients who have subsequently recovered."

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite. She would like to see Dawkes."

"*Would* she!" exclaimed Mrs. Dunn, in astonishment. "Were the case mine, I would rather send him miles away than see him. I do not understand it."

A peculiar expression crossed the face of Thomas Kage. Matter-of-fact, rather than imaginative, Sarah Dunn was just one of those who would not be likely to understand.

"Dawkes may not be willing to come," observed Mr. Kage. "*He* probably would rather go miles any other way."

But Barnaby Dawkes was not altogether heartless, and if he had cared for any one in the world, it was certainly Belle. As Thomas Kage was bending his steps across one of the squares,

he accidentally met him in his mail-phaeton, two grooms seated behind. Mr. Kage made a sign that he would speak with him; and afterwards the captain changed his course, and pulled up at Mrs. Richard Dunn's door.

Her head lay upon his arm, and the tears were trickling down her flushed cheeks. Barnaby Dawkes was a selfish man by nature and by habit, indifferent to all that did not concern himself, utterly careless of any world save this present one; but, looking on the wreck of that once sweet girl, on the unmistakable signs that said the life would so shortly close, he went into a fit of remorse and tenderness, both genuine.

"You will not quite forget me?" she sobbed, clinging to him. "I mean no treason to your wife, Barnaby; I would not for the world; only—only—that you will think of me at an odd moment now and then."

Incredible as it may be deemed, little as the gallant captain might ever believe it of himself afterwards, a tear dropped from his eyes on her upturned face. Belle saw it, and felt repaid for her lost life and the agony that had shortened it.

"Don't grieve for me too much, Barnaby; I should not like that. I hope you will be happy always, you and your wife. If she ever hears about me—about me and the past—give my dear love to her, and say I said it."

"I wish I had never met you, child! I was an awful brute to leave you and marry another—and that's the fact. My love was all yours, Belle; but I was in a fearful state of embarrassment, and wanted money. Why did you care so much for me? Why did you let it prey upon you? I was not worth it."

Never a truer word spoke he than that. Belle's restless fingers, at peace for the moment, were entwined within his.

"I dare say it was all for the best," she murmured. "I might have died just the same."

Voices were heard on the stairs, and the captain prepared to take his departure.

"Say you forgive me," he whispered.

"I forgive it all—the death, and the pain, and the weariness. I hope we shall meet in heaven, all of us, and live together in

happiness for ever and for ever. God bless and keep you, Barnaby, until that time shall come!"

It may be that Barnaby Dawkes, irreligious man though he was, echoed the wish for the passing moment. Whether he did or not, was known to him alone. He kissed her cheeks, her brow, her lips, as he had been wont to kiss them in earlier days, and laid her wan face back on the pillow, and resigned her hands the last.

"Good-bye, Belle. Good-bye, my best and dearest!"

The voices were those of Mr. Dunn and Dr. Tyndal. Captain Dawkes exchanged courtesies with them as he passed, and went out to his carriage.

When Thomas Kage got there in the evening, according to promise, the hands of the dying girl, in her bed then, were working feebly at the counterpane; the shadow of death, no longer to be mistaken, lay on the face. But the shadow seemed to have brought peace with it.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A FEW WHISPERED WORDS.

On the pseudo-mosaic floor of a place of worship—that was neither Protestant church, nor Roman Catholic chapel, nor curiously-decorated mediæval drawing-room, but partaking something of all three—knelt Keziah Dawkes. A hard cold woman looked she, as she rose and sat down to listen to the sermon, with never a smile on her grey leaden face. The services did not seem to bring much cheer to her. When the short sermon of ten-minutes was ranted through—a sermon which Keziah and the other scattered worshippers present might have been defied to make head or tail, or any sort of sense of—she quitted her seat and glided into the street; into the pleasanter light of a spring twilight evening. The place she had just left was almost dark at midday; else how would the lighted candles on the communion-table have given effect?

For some time now Keziah Dawkes had been a lonely,

disappointed woman, finding her heart and her love thrown back upon her. She had never had but one object of affection throughout her life—and that was her brother Barnaby. Worthless Barnaby! But it often happens that the more worthless a man is, the closer some one or other clings to him. Barnaby Dawkes had done nearly as much as he could do to throw off his sister's affection; at least, so it seemed to her perhaps exacting heart. Wounded to the core, ready to die with disappointment and weariness, Keziah in sheer ennui took to attending one of the ultra-ritualistic daily services that were springing up around her as rapidly as mushrooms.

Time has gone on, reader. Nearly four years have elapsed since the marriage of Barnaby Dawkes and Mrs. Canterbury. They have latterly been staying almost entirely in London: more fashion is to be met with in Belgravia than at the Rock, and both Major Dawkes and his wife are votaries of it. He is Major Dawkes now—having got up a step; and the world looks upon him as one of the most wealthy and flourishing officers in her Majesty's service. A few people—money-lenders, lawyers, and the like—perchance could tell a different tale—that there existed not a more embarrassed man in secret than he. Keziah suspected something of this embarrassment; but not to its fullest extent. When we love any one very deeply we seem to see, as if by intuition, any ill that may surround him. Keziah was very little with Major and Mrs. Dawkes; less even than she used to be, although their mansion was not far removed from her home. Sometimes she would not call upon them once in two months. She had paid them one visit at the Rock in the earlier days of their marriage, but the invitation had never been repeated.

That a man with Major Dawkes's propensity to spend—that any one living on the scale he did, flinging away hundreds, ay and thousands, of pounds—should have gone on from three to four mortal years, and not have come to grief, might have been deemed one of the marvels belonging to Major Dawkes. Mrs. Dawkes's was almost what might have been called a regal income, though in truth not so much as the world set it down at; but Barnaby had fingered it in lavish style. If any one with ten thousand a-year spent twenty thousand, it would not

need a conjurer to foretell what must come of it. Keziah, sharp and calculating, knew pretty well what the state of affairs must be; and she was looking for the explosion of the bomb-shell. To her, it seemed almost like retribution; a judgment upon them for their neglect of her.

But in that well-appointed Belgravian mansion nothing was suspected of its master's embarrassment. He kept it to himself. He had no other resource in decency but to do so, since the troubles were wholly his own. For, it was not the state and style in which they lived that could have hampered them, but Major Dawkes's private pursuits. Neither mistress nor servants knew aught of the matter. The latter were aware that some people, shabby men and others, intruded often on the major, who avoided them when he could; and when he could not, held private colloquies with them in his study, and showed them out himself. The household bills, too, were being pressed for.

Keziah Dawkes left the chapel—or what she might please to call it—behind her, and walked steadily on to her lodgings: the same lodgings where you once saw her, reader. She had lost them during that long absence, when she was down at Chilling, helping Barnaby to scheme for Mrs. Canterbury; but she had regained them. The evening was chill; the clouds chased each other across the sky; the wind blew round the corners with a wintry sound. Passing a gay shop-window, its wares lighted up by the blazing gas, Keziah's eyes were caught by something, and she stopped to look in.

"It's a sweet bonnet," she exclaimed, after a long gaze; "and only ten-and-sixpence! I could not make it for much less myself; and somehow my home-made bonnets have always a dowdy look. It's not so much but I could afford it; and spring's getting on. Suppose I come by daylight and look at it? But then"—pausing—"there's Aunt Garston! I *don't* think she can last much longer; and it would be waste of money to buy it, if I had to go into mourning soon afterwards."

With a lingering look, Keziah turned away, and continued her course towards home, revolving the bonnet argument in her mind, for and against the purchase. The wind took her cloak, the chilly air seemed to penetrate her; but Keziah was used to wind and weather. Arrived at her door, she opened it,

and went upstairs; taking off her cloak on the landing, and shaking it. The tea-things were on the table, glowing pleasantly in the firelight; and some dark form, to which her eye was not accustomed, filled the easy-chair, with its washed-out, thin chintz-cover.

"Barnaby! Is it you?"

"What an awfully long time you've been coming in!" was the major's responsive greeting. "Thought you must have gone out to make a night of it."

"I have only been to evening prayers."

"Been to what?"

"The evening service at a new chapel. A place we have had opened here."

"It's not Sunday," said the major, staring.

"I know that. What am I to do, alone here always? never a soul to speak to! The evening services break the monotony; it's an object to get out for: but I don't go every evening. I wouldn't have gone now had I thought you were coming." She put her bonnet on the bed in the inner room, came back, and began to make the tea. The shining copper kettle stood singing on the brass plate; a new loaf and some butter were on the table. "You will take a cup of tea, Barnaby?"

"Not I. Wishy-washy stuff!"

"Some bread-and-butter, then?"

"That's worse."

"Is there anything else that I can get you?"

"No; thanks. I'm going home to dinner."

Keziah took the candles from the mantel-piece, and lighted both in honour of her company; when alone, she generally contented herself with one. That Barnaby had come for some aid or other, she was sure of; but she did not see what he, the great man, could want from her now. The candles lighted up his face; the same handsome face, with the shining black eyes and hair as of yore; but somewhat of perplexity sat on his features. He was leaning forward towards the fire, and pulling at his moustache moodily, as if in a brown study. Keziah poured out her tea, and sat sipping it.

"Do you think you could do anything for me with the old party?" he suddenly began.

"In what way?" coldly asked Keziah, knowing that the "old party" meant Mrs. Garston.

"I don't believe she'll last a month longer, Keziah."

"She will not last long; I am sure of that. When those vigorous old women begin to fail—as she is failing now—their time is drawing to a close."

A pause ensued. Keziah, brimful of her wrongs and Barnaby's ingratitude, would not prompt him by so much as a word. She cut herself a piece of bread-and-butter.

"I want you to see her for me, Keziah."

"To see her for you!" The chilling tone grated on the major's ear. He turned his head.

"What's the matter with you, Keziah?"

"The matter with me?" repeated Keziah, as if bent on re-echoing his words. "Nothing more than usual."

"You have not been pleasant with me for some time, Keziah."

"What have you been with me?"

"I!"—the major turned to the fire again in a frightful access of gloom—"I've not meant to be anything else. But—I am awfully worried, Keziah."

"You bring your worry on yourself, I expect."

He did not attempt to gainsay it; he had never been otherwise than tolerably candid with his sister.

"I am in a mess, Keziah. If I cannot get helped out of it, Heaven knows what the end will be."

"You have been in many a mess before."

"Never such as this. I want to talk it over with you: as I used to talk over the troubles of the old days, Kezzy."

"Yes! You come to me when you need anything—never else. Barnaby, I do not believe Heaven ever created your fellow for selfishness!"

"I am not selfish!" snapped the major.

"Not selfish! Listen, Barnaby: I may be the better, perhaps, for letting loose a little of the grievances long burning within me. When we were brother and sister together, who helped you as I did—and loved you—and cherished you? Who stood between you and Aunt Garston, and told her lies without end to cover your faults, and divert her shrewd sus-

picions from you? Who parted with all available means, that you should be pulled out of ditches and straits? Who helped you to your rich wife; and shielded you in all ways when you wanted shielding? Answer me that."

"You did," avowed the major, fancying an open policy might be the best in the awkward situation.

"Yes; I. You married your wife, and came into what would once have seemed to you incalculable wealth—what was so, in fact; and how did you recompense me? By throwing me over, as if I were some menial that you had no longer work for."

"Don't talk nonsense, Keziah!"

"*Is* it nonsense? You know better. It is true you repaid me the bare money I had advanced; but not a fraction over, for thanks or interest. Without the repayment I could not have lived, for it was my income that I forestalled and risked for you. Had it not been my income—had it been saved money—I don't believe you would have ever troubled yourself to repay it at all. Since your marriage you have not treated me as a sister—I was nobody in your fresh ties."

"It was not that," burst forth the major. "Ties! The ties have never been to me half what you were."

"It has been self with you always, Barnaby—self, self, self," she resumed, the hard tone subsiding into a plaintive one, for the avowal had somewhat appeased her. "It of course was nothing for your wife to neglect me—it was to be expected, perhaps; but I did not look for it from you; and the pain has been hard to bear."

"I don't see why I should not tell you the truth," he said, "though I've never told it before. The neglect has been Caroline's. She—she took a dislike to you, Keziah, goodness knows why; and I never have been able to prevail upon her to have you with us, except for that short visit when you came to the Rock. *My* will has been good to have you—to have you always; but she would not."

It was all very well to excuse himself in this way. He had been quite as willing to neglect her as his wife had. Keziah was coming round. The old love for him had only been smouldering; it would never leave her but with life.

"It may be as you say, Barnaby; but your wife is not you. *You* might have come to see me—you might have been generous to me; it was in your power to make my life bright, and you have not attempted to throw even a ray on it. A hundred times have I sat here, by my solitary fire, on a winter's evening, repeating over to myself that old song of Shakespeare's: 'Blow, blow, thou wintry wind; thou art not so unkind as man's ingratitude.'"

Apparently the remembrance overcame her. Keziah Dawkes burst into tears, and put her handkerchief to her face. Barnaby could not remember ever to have seen her cry in all his life. A sudden impulse of affection—if such could exist in the man's nature—or of self-interest well acted, caused him to put out his hand, and clasp fondly the one lying unoccupied on her lap. Almost at once she dried her tears, as though ashamed to have given way to them.

"Let bygones be bygones, Keziah; there's nobody in the world I care for half as much as I do for you; there's no one else I would tell my troubles to. Will you hear, and help me?"

"I am willing to hear you, Barnaby. But as to help, I should not think *that* lies in my power."

"Substantial help of course does not. You need not fear I wish to ask for the advance of your poor little income again. It would be of no use to me; but as a bucket of water to the flowing Thames. What I do want is, that you would see Mrs. Garston, and get her—get her to make her will in my favour. Not a stone must be left unturned, Keziah."

"You want it badly?"

Badly! Worse than Keziah, happily for her, had as yet any notion of. The major drew a sketch of his embarrassments and difficulties; and Keziah grew a little frightened.

"Barnaby! How can you have been so mad?"

"Money melts," said the major, gloomily. "It is only when a man pulls himself up that he sees how much has gone."

"But how can you have got into this state?"

"The deuce knows," he wrathfully answered. "*I* don't."

"I suppose—it is—the play," she said in a hesitating whisper. "Oh, Barnaby! and you so faithfully resolved to leave it off when you married Mrs. Canterbury!"

"A man could leave off many things, but for the cursed temptation that surrounds him on all sides in this miserable town. What's the good of his resolves then?"

"I suppose it has been going from bad to worse—bad to worse?"

"It is pretty bad now, I know that."

"What can be done?"

"I must get some money. If I don't get that——" Here the major stopped.

"Well?" said Keziah.

"I *must* get it; that's all," repeated he.

"I suppose it is a great deal that you want?"

"Tolerable."

"And have you any idea how it is to be had?"

"I've run it over in my mind; I have been doing nothing else for some time past; and I see only two ways possible. That Kage should advance me some of Tom Canterbury's hoards; or that old Mother Garston should put me down for a pot of money in her will."

"Is either likely?" asked Keziah, in a tone that said volumes.

"Deuced unlikely. I have tried Kage. I went down to his chambers, and put the matter to him in as favourable a light as circumstances allowed. He did not entertain it; it would not have been him if he had, hang him! He stopped me off-hand, in his coldly civil manner, and as good as showed me the door."

Keziah shook her head. "You would find it difficult, I am sure, to get anything of that kind out of Mr. Kage; he sticks up for principle. He would be afraid of not getting it paid back; and that either he must refund, or little Canterbury be a loser."

"He was afraid of something—and be shot to him! I hate the man. Any way, that outlet seems closed; and there's only Mrs. Garston to fall back upon."

Keziah, in her secret heart, knew there was no more chance of Barnaby's getting money from her, by will or otherwise (beyond what she might have already left him), than there was of his getting it from Mr. Kage. Less, in fact. Of the two, she considered there would be more hope with the barrister.

"Barnaby, you may put Aunt Garston out of the question, for she will never lend you any, or leave you much."

"You must try what you can do" said the major, irritably.

"She would not hear me. If I persisted in pressing the question, she would call her servants to show me out of the house. Since that—that unhappy affair, she has never once allowed me to mention your name."

Barnaby Dawkes lifted his eyes in surprise.

"What affair?"

"Of Belle Annesley."

A minute's silence. Keziah turned round, and drank what tea was left in her cup.

"Keziah," he said hoarsely, his black eyes taking quite a fierce gleam as he looked at her—a gleam born of trouble—"I tell you that I must have money, though I move heaven and earth to get it."

"My will is good to give it you, Barby," she answered, all the old affection coming back with a rush; "but when I know —I know—that the notion of getting it from Mrs. Garston is more visionary than that wind now sweeping past the window, it would be foolish of me to deceive you with hope. Could you not borrow money upon your income? Upon your wife's income, I mean?"

"I have done a little in that way," acknowledged the major. "Can't get another stiver on it from any money-lender breathing; have tried the greater portion of 'em. Don't you see? If she died to-morrow, it would not come to me, but to the boy; and they are cautious."

"I don't quite understand."

"Should Caroline die in the boy's lifetime, the income she enjoys lapses to him. Should he die in hers, while he is a minor, his money lapses to her. When old Canterbury made his will, he seemed to forget that anybody existed in the world but those two."

"And should the boy die after he is of age, to whom does it lapse then?"

"To whomsoever he shall will it. It's an awful lot of money, his is; and Kage will take sharp care of the accumulations. By Jove! when I remember sometimes that that

miserable little unit of six years old is keeping me out of wealth, I'm—I'm—savage."

"Don't, Barnaby."

"Don't what?"

"Talk in that way. You should keep such thoughts down," added Keziah sensibly. "The thing is so, and you cannot alter it. You ought to have begun at first to put by out of your wife's large income, and insured her life."

"How I hate Kage!" growled the major. "Any other trustee would have accommodated me under the circumstances."

"I don't think there has ever been much love lost between you and him."

"Curse him! It is he who hopes to come in for that old creature's money. He has her ear always. I wouldn't bet a crown that it is not he who is keeping up the ball against me."

Keziah shook her head. "Wrong, Barnaby. I do not fancy he will come in for her money. And, though he is no favourite of mine, I believe he is too honourable to touch the ball against you, let alone keep it up."

Major Dawkes rose. "Will you see her to-morrow? Do as I bid you, Keziah: move heaven and earth to get her to remember me well. I'd say almost *forge* a will!" he added impulsively—though, it must be confessed, without any real meaning—"for money I must have."

"Don't be angry with me, Barnaby, if I suggest to you another course. I do so only in the conviction that the two you mention are hopeless."

"Well?"

"Be made a bankrupt at once."

Major Dawkes glared a little. *He* a bankrupt!

"You don't know what you say, Keziah."

"I see the social disadvantages just as well as you; but at least you would be clear. Of course I don't mean a regular bankruptcy as tradespeople have to go through—I mean privately; what they call whitewashed."

"I can't be."

"Can't be?"

"Will you help me, or won't you?" he repeated in desperation. "There's more necessity for help than you know yet."

"What necessity? Tell me all, Barnaby, if you have not told it. It may be better. Perhaps we are at cross-purposes."

It is possible that the major thought it might be better. He hesitated for half a moment, looking at her upturned face; then he whispered two or three words in her ear, and went out, whistling softly, leaving Keziah as white as ashes.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CALLED OUT OF THE RECEPTION-ROOM.

Lamps at the door and carriages dashing up to it, and the shouting of excited coachmen, and the sweet scent of exotics through the hall and up the staircase, proclaimed that Major and Mrs. Dawkes were holding a reception.

Strictly speaking, it was hers. When the major arrived home, after his interview with Keziah, he had barely time to get into his dinner-coat. Half-a-dozen people dined with them, and the reception came later. The major had quite forgotten there was to be a party, if indeed he had ever been made aware of it. He was beginning to hate these crowds at his own home. Careless-natured though he was, there were certain dangers besetting his path that half frightened him; and the mob jarred upon his nerves. Mrs. Dawkes did not consult him when she should hold her receptions; and was not likely to do so. As yet the dangers were at a tolerable distance; and the major, always sanguine, hoped to avert them.

Not one person do we know amidst the crowd. Satins, feathers, fans, bouquets, jostle the black coats of the men; a goodly company; but to us they are strangers. Mrs. Dawkes, in white silk and lace, her golden hair worn carelessly—and perhaps that is the chief reason of its looking so wondrously beautiful—stands to receive them.

But now some one comes in whom we do know—Thomas Kage, the barrister. And his presence in that house is so very

rare—at least at its gay doings—that Major Dawkes lifts his supercilious eyebrows, and wonders audibly what the dickens has brought him.

This. Some one had said in his ear lately that Mrs. Dawkes was killing herself—killing herself with the dissipated life she led: that she was looking just as though she had one foot in the grave, and might be in it now before her mother, if she did not take care. For that poor old shaking scarecrow was alive yet. A sad burden to herself, a wearing trouble to all around her, she existed on, never moving out of the one room she occupied in her house at Chilling. Fry, her maid, had left her place, strength and patience alike exhausted, and had taken service with Mrs. Dawkes. But it is not with Mrs. Kage that we have anything to do.

So Thomas Kage came to see. He generally had a standing card for Mrs. Dawkes's assemblies. In spite of his non-attendance, she always sent them; and he thought he would for once make use of it. He also wanted to say a word to the major. Drawing aside to let the crowd pass in advance, he stood against the wall whilst he scanned her. Even so. She was looking thin, worn, ill. Dark circles were round her eyes; her lips were feverish; her cough—she coughed three or four times—had a hollow hacking sound. A strange pang shot through the heart of Thomas Kage.

"*You* here!" exclaimed Caroline, her face lighting up with pleasure as she met Mr. Kage's hand. "I should think it would rain gold to-morrow."

"Because my appearance here is so rare?"

"You know it is. If my poor receptions were poison, Thomas, you could not eschew them more than you do."

"I wish I could induce *you* to eschew them, Caroline."

"I! That *is* good!"

"You are looking very thin."

"Yes, I am thin. I have not been well lately."

"What has been the matter?"

"Oh, a cold, I think. I have spit a little blood once or twice."

"Caroline!"

She laughed at his look of consternation.

"It was ever so many weeks ago. Nothing but the cough brought it on. One night, coming out of St. James's Hall, the carriage could not draw up. Major Dawkes was in a hurry to go somewhere, so we walked to it. I had nothing on my neck but a thin lace cape, and the cold caught my chest. I am quite well again. It is the sitting up late and the rackety life we lead that makes me look thin."

"Caroline, I am glad to hear you acknowledge that fact. To lead this life always would injure one twice as strong as you are. There's reason in roasting eggs, you know."

"Apropos of what?"

"But there's no reason in leading it without cessation," continued Mr. Kage, following out his argument. "Why don't you go down to the Rock?"

Caroline shrugged her pretty shoulders. The diamonds resting on her neck (Olive Canterbury's diamonds by right) glittered in their marvellous beauty. "Do you want me to die of ennui, Thomas? I should if I went there."

"You did not die of it when you lived there in the days gone by."

"But I had not then tried a London life. It *is* dull for me there, Thomas. You cannot say otherwise; and the major never stays there with me. The last time I went there, if he came down for a couple of days, he was all restlessness until he got off again. He has his pursuits here, his brother-officers and that, and cannot bear to tear himself away from them. In July, or August at the latest, I shall go with little Tom to one of the quiet German baths for two months. It will set us both up."

"Tom is not very strong," he remarked.

"He was as strong and healthy a little fellow born as could be, but he has failed somewhat lately. They say his chest is weak."

"I know what I should say—if you will allow me, Caroline."

"Say on," she laughingly rejoined.

"That it is the confinement in London that disagrees with him. For the first three or four years of the child's life he was kept chiefly in the healthy country air, and then you transplanted him to this close town. Suppose you treated a plant so. It would soon droop, if not die."

Mrs. Dawkes grew grave. The argument struck her.

"There is really nothing amiss with the child, Thomas; except that he has lately looked delicate."

"But he should look hardy, and not delicate. I say, Caroline, that he requires country air. And so do you."

"He has a wonderful affinity with me, that child," exclaimed Caroline fondly. "If I droop, he seems to droop. You come to see him oftener than you do me, sir."

"Is it my fault if you lie in bed of a morning?" asked Mr. Kage in laughing tones. "In going to the Temple I sometimes walk round here: it is the most convenient time for me and for Tom. 'Mamma's not up,' he always says."

The soft strains of a band in another apartment rose on their ear. Caroline passed her arm within her cousin's. "You will go through a quadrille with me, Thomas?" she whispered.

And Mr. Kage heard it with intense surprise.

"A quadrille! I? Why, do you know how long it is since I danced one?"

"How long is it?"

"So long that I cannot recollect. Yes, I do. The last time I danced a quadrille was that long bygone year when I was staying with my mother at Little Bay. I danced it with you, Caroline."

Their eyes met, quite unintentionally on either side; and for a brief moment the sweet fantasy of that departed time was recalled to either heart.

"I have never danced one since," said Mr. Kage.

"But you will this evening?"

"I do not think you ought to dance at all. You give yourself too much fatigue without that."

"I will be good, and have only this one, if you will dance it with me. There; that's a promise."

"Really, Caroline, I do not remember the figures."

She gently drew him on, and he stood up with her. Two or three very young men, embryo barristers, put up their glasses when they saw him, and laughed with each other. There was nothing to laugh at, either in him or his dancing; but they had never seen the sight before.

Later, when Mr. Kage was looking about for Major Dawkes,

in the rooms and out of them, and unable to find him, Judith appeared in view, coming down the stairs.

"I never see such a child," she exclaimed to Mr. Kage, between whom and herself there was much confidence on the score of her little charge. "Just look, sir"—indicating a bit of folded paper in her hand. "Because his mamma did not have him in to say good night, he has been writing this to her, and made me bring it. Oh, it's you, ma'am."

Mrs. Dawkes opened the paper, holding it so that Thomas Kage could see. "My dearest mamma, I say good night to you. You must come and kiss me when the people are gone. I shall lie awake looking at the angels. I have said my prayers."

"What does he mean by 'looking at the angels'?" questioned Mr. Kage of Caroline.

"Oh, he means that little toy that poor Belle Annesley gave him. He never goes to bed without it, does he, Judith?"

"Never, ma'am. There he is now, set up on end in his little bed, and the thing open before him."

"You ought to make him go to sleep, Judith."

"I should like to know how, ma'am," replied the woman respectfully; "he's a'most as fond of music as he is of his angels. There'll be no sleep for him till the tunes have shut up for the night."

"I will come to him before I go to bed," said Caroline, escaping to her guests.

But Mr. Kage thought he should like to see the boy then, and turned towards the stairs. It was a frightfully high house, this Belgravian mansion; the roof pretty well in the clouds. This floor was devoted to reception-rooms; on the next were the best bed-chambers; on the one above that, slept Tom; and there were the cloud apartments yet, no end to them. The day and the night nursery opened one into the other; they were rather small, for on that landing were crowded several rooms. Tom was sitting up in bed, the purple-silk curtain at its head drawn between him and the door. Mrs. Dawkes was careful of her treasure, as though he were some rich toy, and surrounded him with comforts. He thought it was his nurse coming back.

"Did you get to see her, Judith?"

"Yes, and gave the document."

The answer was in Mr. Kage's voice, and the boy put aside the curtain with a joyful shout. Not a loud shout; he was never boisterous, as boys mostly are. His fair curls were brushed back; his white night-gown lay smooth on his shoulders; before him, on the counterpane, was the pretty toy given him by Belle.

"What do you mean by this line of conduct, young sir? Sitting up like this, when you should be fast asleep!"

Tom laughed. "I am hearing the music!" he said.

"Do you make a point of listening to it always at these hours, when it may be going on?"

"Yes, always," said Tom, stoutly; "I wish they'd play, 'Here we suffer grief and pain'!"

"What may that be?" asked Mr. Kage.

"It's a song Fry taught me. Shall I sing a verse of it to you?"

There was a lull in the music at the time; and the boy began, in his weak, gentle, but very sweet voice: a voice that would be worth hearing some day if he lived—

"Here we suffer grief and pain,
Here we meet to part again,
In heaven we part no more.
Oh, that will be joyful, joyful, joyful!
Oh, that will be joyful!
When we meet to part no more."

The boy, who had clasped his hands as he sang, unclasped them, and looked up.

"You are a curious child," thought Mr. Kage.

"The other verse is about little children; but I don't know it quite yet. It begins, 'Little children will be there'—in heaven, you know."

Thomas Kage made no answer. He was gazing down, lost in thought, on the boy's delicate face. An idea came over him, almost as a prevision, that the lad would not live beyond the age of childhood. For a moment regret had full place.

"God knows best," he said, in his inward heart; and he laid his hand on the child's head, and kept it there.

"Where's Judith, Mr. Kage?"

The question recalled him to present things; and Judith's step was even then heard. Mr. Kage went down, intending to find Major Dawkes as he departed, and say the word he wished to say. But the major seemed not easy to be found. A short time before this, one of the servants had made his way quietly to his master, saying in a whisper that he was wanted below. The man, Richards by name, was attached more than any of the rest to his master's personal service, and knew pretty well about his embarrassments.

"Wanted at this hour!" exclaimed the major haughtily. "Who is it?"

"It's Mr. Jessup, sir."

"Mr. Jessup! Did you admit him?"

"He admitted himself, sir. The front doors are open to-night."

"You are a fool, Richards," said the major, wrathfully.

Mr. Jessup was the major's principal lawyer. His coming at that late hour boded no good; and, good or ill, the major resented being disturbed. There were times for business, and times for pleasure. Richards had put Mr. Jessup into the major's study—the room with the pipes and pistols. Many an unpleasant interview had it been witness to lately: Major Dawkes was beginning to shun it. Only one of the gas-lights was burning; and Mr. Jessup, a portly man with a flaxen wig, stood under it. Major Dawkes had just told his servant Richards he was a fool; Mr. Jessup, waiting for his audience, was thinking that, of all fools the world ever saw, his client Barnaby Dawkes was about the greatest. Standing together, the conference was carried on in low tones—almost a whisper; dangerous secrets cannot be discussed loudly. A certain matter—or rather a suspicion of a certain matter—had reached Mr. Jessup's ears that evening, and he came down to the major.

"Is it so, major? You had better tell me."

The major would a great deal rather not tell. He shuffled and equivocated, and finally subsided into silence. Mr. Jessup did not make a pretence of listening to him: he knew what he knew.

"No earthly thing can patch up this and avert exposure,

except one, major; and that is, money. You must get it. No light sum, either."

It was the lawyer's parting mandate. Major Dawkes, left alone, took a rapid survey of his situation, feeling something like a man desperate. Money he must have; it was as true as heaven.

A sharp glance upwards, as the door opened; and an angry frown. He had thought it was the lawyer coming back again; but it was Mr. Kage. Richards had said where his master might be found. "I will not disturb you for a minute, Major Dawkes. I have only a word or two to say. Are you giving it out that I am going to advance you some of Thomas Canterbury's money?"

"No!"

"Two or three applications have been made to me—from your creditors, I presume—asking whether it be true that I am about to accommodate Major Dawkes with funds from the estate to which I stand trustee. I could only think you had been spreading the report."

"I may have said that I wished you would do it," said the major. "People jump to conclusions."

"I wish you would undeceive them, then. It gives them trouble, and me too."

"What was your answer, pray?"

"That they were under a misapprehension altogether; that I had neither the power nor the will to advance any money belonging to Thomas Canterbury."

Major Dawkes bit his lip. "It would so oblige me, Kage—if you could be induced to do it. The money would be as safe as the Bank of England; I would give you security, and repay the whole within a year."

"You had my answer before, major. I told you then that I must decline discussion on the subject; pardon me if I adhere to it. Could I allow even that, I should be scarcely a true trustee. Good night."

"Good night," was the major's answer. "And I wish you were dead, I do!" he growled, as a parting blessing.

CHAPTER XXX.

AN OLD WARNING RECALLED.

SHRUNKEN and wasted now. The fire had gone out for ever from the once fierce grey eyes; the strong hands were as feeble as a child's: but the will was vigorous still, and the body strove to be so. Mrs. Garston, with her all but ninety years, was better than are some at seventy. She sat by the fire in her handsome chamber, in a warm dressing-gown of quilted grey silk, her night-cap on her head. Towards evening she *would* get up, in spite of Dr. Tyndal—in spite of every one. Her hands lay on her lap, her head was bowed forward—the old stiff uprightness could not be maintained now.

"It's time I was gone, Thomas. The silver cord's loosed, and the golden bowl's broken. A few more weary days and nights, and you'll put me in the grave."

In his sense of truth, in the strong opinion he held against attempting to deceive the dying with false hopes, Thomas Kage did not attempt to refute her words. He sat near her, having called in, as was his custom, on coming home from the Temple.

"I should like to lie by your mother. We lived side by side in life; why not repose together in death? Mind about that, Thomas—but it is in my written directions. She was young enough to be my daughter, and she was called away years before me. Only a little while to wait now."

The fire played on the fresh colours of the hearthrug. Mrs. Garston liked bright things yet. Its flame flickered on the face that would never more be winsome.

"It seems a dark road at starting, Thomas—this setting out for the journey through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Once the gate's passed through, it will be light eternal. Many have gone through it before me; many have to come after."

Something in the words struck oddly on Thomas Kage's heart. He bent forward, speaking in a whisper: "You do not fear the passage?"

"Me! Fear it? I hope not, child. God help my ingrati-

tude if I did! He would have given me my patriarch's years in vain. I am setting out for the golden city, Thomas; and I don't care how soon I'm there."

She held up one of her hands. He drew his chair nearer, and sat clasping it.

"You've been like a son to me, Thomas. You were better than a son to your mother; and, mind, God's blessing will go with you always. I'm sure of that. You are another that need not fear the summons to the Valley; no, not though it came to you to-night."

Mr. Kage grew slightly uneasy. She had never talked in this way before. He thought there must be some hidden and perhaps unconscious cause for it—that the summons she spoke of might be already overshadowing the spirit.

A pause ensued—rather a long one; her eyes were turned to the fire in thought. When she began to speak again, it was of other things.

"I should like you to move into this house, Thomas, remember. You can let your own."

"This house! It would be too large for me."

"Not it. When a man marries, and has a family about him, he wants plenty of room. Don't you forget that I wish you to come to it. You'd hardly bring Millicent Canterbury home to the next door if you could bring her here. She'd go with you to a hovel, that's my opinion; but she may like elbow-room for all that, when there's no reason why she shouldn't have it."

Not a word said Thomas Kage in refutation. That Millicent Canterbury would be his wife some time—certainly his wife if he married at all—he had grown to think very probable. Whilst his prospects were unassured he would not marry, in spite of Mrs. Garston's sharp orders to do so; but he was getting on well now.

"You'll walk up together once in a way on a summer's evening, you and your wife, Thomas, to take a look at my grave. So will Charlotte. Mind you keep it in good order; but I know you will, because you so keep your mother's. What's the news?"

The transition was sudden. Thomas Kage, smiling slightly, said he knew of none in particular.

"Heard anything about Barby Dawkes?"

"No. Is there any to hear?"

"That's what I asked *you*," said Mrs. Garston, with a touch of her old retort. "I fancied there might be; that's all. Barby's in a mess again, Thomas; a deep one, too."

Mr. Kage thought this more than probable; indeed, he as good as knew it. It was only the day after the one spoken of in the last chapter, when he had been at the reception in the major's house.

"Keziah called this afternoon. They told her I was in bed, not well enough to see any one, and asleep too. She said she must see me, and waited. So when my tea came in, she came with it, for I had but then awoke. What do you think she wanted, Thomas?"

Money, he supposed, but did not say so. He slightly shook his head.

"She had a face, Thomas; but Keziah always had when it was to serve Barby. You wouldn't believe it unless I told you with my own tongue—she wanted me to alter my will in Barby's favour! Something's up with him, Thomas: as true as we are here, something's up. What he has been getting into now, she wouldn't say; I asked her: but it's something bad. She prayed for money for him by gift or by will, as if she was praying for her life; and her voice and hands shook like leaves in the wind."

"I conclude he must be in debt again," observed Thomas Kage.

"Debt of course; and pretty deep. It's not a little thing would move Keziah. I did feel a bit sorry for her."

"Major Dawkes should fight his own battles; not trouble his sister."

"Major Dawkes knows he wouldn't dare put his foot inside my door with any such petition," sharply returned the old lady. "I've kept him at my stick's length, I can tell you, since that matter of little Belle Annesley. She's better off in heaven, poor child, than she would have been with *him*."

She sat silent a minute, thinking perhaps of the past, and the girl's blighted life. Mr. Kage did not interrupt. He would have preferred to hear no more of Major Dawkes and Keziah's petitions. Mrs. Garston began to nod her head.

"Yes, she had a face—to come asking for money for Barby.

He has the fingering of an income half-a-dozen times as heavy as mine; and hasn't made it do, it seems! 'What did I say to you, Keziah?' I asked her—'that if Barby had one hundred thousand a-year, he'd want two.' And so he would, Thomas. 'He is in *great* need, Aunt Garston,' cried Keziah—and upon my word, her lips seemed to be turning blue as she said it—'he may have to fly the country if he does not get it!' 'And the sooner he flies it, the better for those that remain, Keziah,' I answered. 'If Barby had been sent out of it years ago at the Queen's cost, he would only have got what he deserved.' And so he would, Thomas. 'Would you save him from such a fate as that now, Aunt Garston?' says she to me. 'No, I would not,' I told her. And so she had my answer, and went away—it's not above an hour ago. But, Thomas, you take my word for it—that bad man is in for it, shoulder deep. To help him would be a great mistake; next door to a sin; he goes through the world scattering ill both sides his path; and if he gets stopped, so much the better."

What she said was true enough. Money would never help Barnaby Dawkes—never do him any real good. The more he had, the more he would need.

Wishing Mrs. Garston good night, Thomas Kage proceeded to his home, hungry enough; for he had not yet dined, and it was later than usual. He had for some time thought that the staying in his house (as Mrs. Garston in a sense compelled him to do) was all for the best. He was making an ample living now, and his name stood high in his calling before the world. Opening the door with a latch-key, he was about to enter the dining-room, when a maid-servant ran up.

"A lady is there waiting for you, sir. She says she wants to see you on particular business."

"Who is it?" he asked.

"I don't know, sir. She has been here above an hour. We showed her in there, as there was no fire in the drawing-room: and so the cloth's not laid."

When a man, starving for his dinner, is told the cloth's not laid, it is by no means agreeable news. Thomas Kage made the best of it, as he was wont to do of most other ills in life. But he did wonder what lady could be wanting him.

Seated before the fire, her back to the door, he saw some one in a grey-plaid shawl. She got up as he entered, and turned her head. Keziah Dawkes! Grey though her shawl might be, it did not equal the grey hardness of her face: but that had grown habitual. Mr. Kage closed the door, and sat down near her, the recent remark of Mrs. Garston's passing through his mind—that Keziah's voice and hands trembled and her lips turned blue when pleading for Barby. Her voice was not trembling now, as she apologized for taking his house by storm to wait for him. He said a few courteous words, and then left her to tell her business.

"I have come to request a great favour of you," she began. "I know how vast is the liberty I am taking in meddling with what you may deem cannot concern me; but interests are at stake which—which——"

Keziah broke down. Not from emotion: she was not one likely to be superfluously agitated, even for Barby; but because she doubted *what* she could say to justify her plea, and yet not say too much. It had to be done; those calm, honest, steady eyes were patiently fixed on her. She went on a little more quickly.

"You are the sole trustee to Mrs. Dawkes's little son, I believe, Mr. Kage."

"The trustee to his property? Yes."

"It is accumulating largely, they say."

"Of course. With so large a fortune it could not be otherwise."

"I want you to lend a very, very infinitesimal portion of those savings to the child's stepfather," continued Keziah.

"To Major Dawkes?"

"Yes."

"I am truly sorry you should have come here to prefer any such request to me, Miss Dawkes. It is not in my power to grant it."

"In your power it is, Mr. Kage; in your will it may not be."

"Indeed you are in error. It is not in my power to touch a fraction of Thomas Canterbury's money to lend to Major Dawkes or to any other person. If I did so, I should be false to my trust."

"Not false really; only in your own estimation."

"False really; I think you must see that, Miss Dawkes. But, put it as you suggest, I like to stand well with my conscience," he added, smiling, wishing to pass the matter off as lightly as he could.

"I have come to beg, pray, entreat of you to do this," rejoined Keziah, with deep earnestness, as if the smile offended her. "I have come to *wrestle* with you for it, Mr. Kage, if need be."

She half rose from her chair as she spoke. Mr. Kage got up and put his elbow on the mantelpiece. He foresaw the interview might possibly turn out more painful than pleasant.

"To wrestle with you, as Jacob wrestled with the angel on the plains of Peniel," she continued, her voice falling, her cold grey eyes searching his. "To say to you, as *he* said, I will not let you go unless you bless me."

"Were it a thing I could do, Miss Dawkes, I should not need this persuasion. Being what it is, no entreaty or persuasion can move me."

The voice was all too quietly firm. Keziah's heart began to fail within her.

"I never thought you a hard man."

"I do not think I am one. This is not a question of hardness, but of right and wrong."

"To grant the request would cost you nothing."

"The cost to me we will put out of sight, please, Miss Dawkes, as a superfluous consideration. The request is—pardon me—one that you have no right to make, or I to suffer. See you not," he added, bending his head a little in the force of argument, "that if I were capable of lending (say) one hundred pounds of this money lying in my charge, I might, in point of principle, as well lend the whole? If I could bring myself to touch any of it, what is there to prevent my taking it all?"

Of course Keziah saw it; she was a strong-minded woman of sense and discernment. But Barby's position made her feel desperate, obscuring right and wrong.

"The position I stand in, as sole trustee to so large a property, is a very onerous one," he pursued. "When I found

I was appointed to it by Mr. Canterbury's will, the responsibility that would lie on me struck me at once, and I hesitated, for that and other reasons, whether to accept it. Eventually I did so; but I was quite sure of myself, Miss Dawkes. Had I not been, the world would never have found me acting."

Keziah sat forward in the chair, her head resting on her hand. Mr. Kage, still standing, faced her. He seemed firmer than that celebrated mansion pertaining to the boy's property—the Rock.

"It is so trifling a sum that I ask you the loan of! Only three or four thousand pounds."

"The amount, more or less—as you must perceive—has nothing to do with it."

"Do you think that Major Dawkes would not pay you back again?"

"I think Major Dawkes neither would nor could," fearlessly replied Mr. Kage. "But—pardon me for repeating it—the question does not lie there."

"Can you suppose that you are fulfilling your duty to the child, when you thus refuse this poor little meed of aid to one who stands to him as a father?" flashed Keziah, temper getting for a moment into the ascendant.

"My duty to the child, my duty to his dead father, lies in refusing it," said Mr. Kage, quietly. "But that Mr. Canterbury felt perfectly secure in my faithfulness, he surely would not have placed in my sole hands this great amount of power."

Argument seemed useless, and Keziah sighed heavily. Her face began to take a hopeless look, and Thomas Kage felt for her. But he would have given up his life rather than his probity.

"When Major Dawkes applied to me upon this subject—which fact, I presume, is known to you, by your coming yourself—I stopped him at the outset, Miss Dawkes. I told him that the matter was one that did not admit of argument; neither would I permit any."

Keziah did not take the hint. Tenacious by nature in all that concerned Barnaby, she was persistently so now.

"Put yourself in my brother's place, Mr. Kage," she pleadingly said, her tone taking a degree of softness. "If you had

some desperately pressing need of temporary help, how would you feel if it were denied you—as you are denying me?"

"I must really beg of you not to pursue this farther," was his rejoinder. "It gives you pain, and is utterly useless."

"Did you understand my hint?" she asked, dropping her voice. "He is in desperate need of it; *desperate!* Nothing else would justify my persistency after your refusal. It is not common debt."

"I am sorry to hear it," said Mr. Kage. "I suspected something of the kind."

"*Will* you not lend it him?"

"No. I regret you should make me repeat my refusal so often. There is no alternative."

Keziah began to understand that there would be none. She lifted her face to his.

"Could you lend him any of your own money, then? *I* would be responsible as well as he for its return."

Mr. Kage smiled. "You would find me much less hard in regard to my own, if I had any to lend. A struggling barrister does not put by money."

"For 'struggling' say 'rising.' You are that now."

"But I have not been so long enough to grow rich," he rejoined; involuntarily thinking that, if he were rich, Major Dawkes would be the last person to whom he would lend money.

"Do you know any one who would? Any client, for example? Barnaby would pay high interest."

"I do not, indeed. A solicitor would be the proper person to apply to—or a money-lender."

Keziah's private belief was, that Barnaby had exhausted those accommodating gentlemen. She sat on, never attempting to move, and at last began to say a good word for Barnaby.

"There is every excuse to be made for my brother; you must acknowledge that, Mr. Kage."

"Excuse for what?"

"For running into debt. He has been placed in the midst of temptation. Married to a woman who has so large an income, what else could be expected of a man?"

Thomas Kage stared a little. "I should have considered it

just the position that a man might find safety in, Miss Dawkes. Every luxury of life is provided for, without cost to himself."

"You forget his personal expenses—gloves and that."

"Not at all. He reckons, I believe, to draw two thousand a-year from his wife's income for them. And there's his pay besides."

"Who told you that?" asked Keziah, quite sharply.

"Mrs. Dawkes. I had occasion to consult her on a matter connected with the estate, and she incidentally mentioned that Major Dawkes drew two thousand a-year for his private pocket."

Keziah bit her lip. "Well, what's two thousand a-year to a man of my brother's habits? He has to do as others do."

"I question if Major Dawkes confines himself to the two thousand," rejoined Mr. Kage, significantly. "Mrs. Canterbury married him without being secured, and her money lies at the bank in his name. As we are upon the point, Miss Dawkes, it is as well to be correct."

"You wish to make out that he draws just what he pleases of it!" she said resentfully.

"I wish to make out nothing. I have not the smallest doubt but that he does do it."

Keziah stood at bay. She had risen to leave; was she to go in her despair, resigning every hope? Once more a piteous appeal for help went out to Mr. Kage. And yet she knew it would be useless as she spoke it. At length she turned to go, Mr. Kage attending her.

"The mystery to me is, how he can get rid of so much money," he remarked, on impulse, as he laid his hand on the lock of the door.

"He gambles," whispered Keziah, forgetting Barnaby's interests for once in her bitter abandonment.

"Gambles. Ay, there it is."

But Thomas Kage had no doubt known as much before. He closed the street-door on his guest, and Keziah went out into the bleak night, wondering what now could be done for her brother.

Thomas Kage returned to his room, and whilst standing over the fire until they should bring his dinner, recalled a certain warning in regard to the boy's money that Mrs. Garston

had given him years before. He had thought it superfluous then.

"Take you care of it, or Barby will be too many for you. He'd wring the heart out of a living man if it were made of gold."

CHAPTER XXXI.

VERY UNSATISFACTORY.

Something like a week went by, and then Mrs. Garston's house was closed. The hale old lady had gone to her rest. Down came Mr. Jessup, her solicitor; the same man of law who acted (but not always) for Barnaby Dawkes. Major Dawkes was sometimes involved in odds-and-ends of affairs that he would not have taken to him, a respectable practitioner. Before her death, Mrs. Garston had said to those about her, "When anything happens to me, send for Jessup, and let him look in my desk for instructions."

Keziah Dawkes was with her when she died. Whether in any hope that a second appeal might be of use to Barnaby, whether in solicitude for the old lady's precarious state, Keziah presented herself at the house one morning, and found her aunt dying—all but gone. Keziah was very angry that she had not been summoned; but Mrs. Garston's maid—who had grown old in her service—said her mistress had forbidden her to send to either her or the major. Mr. Kage had taken his leave of her the previous night; when he called in that morning, she was already insensible. Keziah listened, and could only resign herself to fate. In less than an hour all was over. Keziah, taking off her bonnet, remained. She felt to be more mistress in the house than she had ever been before. She went peering about surreptitiously in various places, thinking she would give the whole world to know how things were left. A faint foolish hope had been growing up in her heart—that perhaps, after all, her aunt had relented in favour of Barby.

Mr. Jessup searched for the paper of instructions. They

were found to have reference chiefly to her funeral. Keziah looked over his shoulder. Mrs. Garston directed that she should be buried by the side of Lady Kage, and that Thomas Kage should follow her as chief mourner.

He chief mourner!—a pang of dread shot through Keziah's heart. Could this be an intimation that she had made that man her heir? Barby had said it would be so. And yet, one slight circumstance gave Keziah some little courage: she gathered from the servants that Mr. Jessup had been summoned to a conference on the Friday in the past week. Counting back the days, Keziah found this must have been the one following that pleading visit of hers for Barby. A burning hope again sprang up within her. Yes, Mrs. Garston might have relented.

"Can you tell me whether my aunt has altered her will lately?" inquired Keziah of Mr. Jessup, who was putting a seal on an Indian cabinet, where Mrs. Garston's principal papers were kept.

The lawyer turned and looked at the speaker, as if questioning her right to ask.

"You think the inquiry an indiscreet one, I see, Mr. Jessup. In truth, it is almost needless, considering that the will must so soon be made public. But as Mrs. Garston sent for you last week, I thought, perhaps, she might have wanted some alteration made in her will. The summons was a peremptory one, I believe."

"That's just what she did want, Miss Dawkes."

"Did it concern my brother?" quickly cried Keziah, holding her breath.

"I cannot say but it did," was the lawyer's answer. "That is all I can tell you now, Miss Dawkes," he added, interrupting her as she was about to speak. "For particulars on that and other points you must be content to wait for the will itself."

Well, Keziah could do that; there were some grains of hope to live upon. Very anxiously did she search the lawyer's countenance, if by good luck she might gather from it courage or disappointment; but it gave out neither. A wax face in a barber's shop could not be more expressionless than his. Tying on her bonnet with eager fingers, pulling her grey-plaid

shawl around her, she made her way to the street-door, and met Thomas Kage in the garden. A few words passed between them concerning the old friend gone, and then Keziah put a home question.

"Do you know how things are left, Mr. Kage?"

"No."

"Jessup is in there sealing up the places," continued Keziah, looking hard at Thomas Kage, almost as though she doubted his denial. "I find that my aunt altered her will last week, and that the alteration concerned Barnaby."

"Indeed!" was all he answered.

"Of course, after our recent interview, you cannot but know that this is of the very utmost moment to me, Mr. Kage, for my brother's sake," she resumed. "To him it is almost a matter of life or death. If you do know how Aunt Garston's will is left, it cannot hurt you to tell me."

"But I do not," he replied. "I assure you, Miss Dawkes, that I know nothing whatever about the will—absolutely nothing. She never told me how her affairs were settled; never has given me so much as a hint of it."

Keziah saw that he was speaking truth, and continued her way, leaving him to enter. Barnaby Dawkes's communication to her that night at her house—the few whispered words as he was leaving—had nearly scared her senses away. Unless help came to him—Keziah shivered as she strove to put away the thought of what might follow after. Her great anxiety to ascertain whether he was left well off was this, that Barnaby might be able to quiet unpleasant creditors at once with the news.

"Barby, she's gone!" exclaimed Keziah, bursting in upon him as he sat in his study looking over some letters, a cigar in his mouth.

"Who's gone?" returned the major, thinking of any one at the moment rather than of Mrs. Garston.

"The poor old deaf creature. She died about an hour ago."

Major Dawkes got up and stood with his back to the fire, into which he threw the end of the cigar. Keziah thought he looked startled. "Dead, is she? Rather sudden!"

"No; they say not. It's a shame I was not sent for."

"You see now there was not so much time to lose," remarked the major. "You might as well have done as I asked you, Keziah."

"I did do it, Barby dear. I went to her the day afterwards. She wouldn't give me the slightest hope; was just as rudely abusive of you as ever. So then I went to Mr. Kage."

The major lifted his eyes. "What for?"

"To get him to lend you a small mite of the trust money; or rather to try to get him. It was of no use; he was as hard as adamant."

"I could have told you it would be no use going to him," was the rough answer; "and I'm sorry you went."

"Well, I did it for the best," she said, thinking how thankless he was—ready to swear at her rather than be grateful. Major Dawkes gave the fire a stamp with his heel. A habit of his. "Old Jessup is at the place sealing up the things," continued Keziah. "He had to come and open the instructions for the funeral. Thomas Kage is to be the chief mourner. If——"

"And the chief heir too, I expect," explosively interrupted the major. "A sly, sneaking, greedy hound!"

"He's not that, Barby. If she has left him her heir, depend upon it, it is without any connivance of his. But I think there's a chance for you."

"It's to be hoped there is."

She told him what she had learnt, about the lawyer being summoned to make some alteration in the will, and his acknowledgment that it concerned Major Dawkes. The major shouted at the news. He looked upon it as a certainty in that sanguine moment, and his spirits went up accordingly.

The funeral was over. The fine spring day was drawing to a close as the carriages came back again. Thomas Kage, according to appointment, was chief mourner; just as he had been many years before at another grave lying close beside.

The mourners assembled in the drawing-room. Keziah Dawkes, the only lady present, looking very grim in her black robes; Mr. Kage; Richard Dunn; Major Dawkes; Charlotte Lowther's husband; Mr. Lynn-Garston, a wealthy country

squire, whose brother, Harry Lynn-Garston, was to have married Olive Canterbury; and the lawyer. The will, exciting so much hope and fear in Keziah's breast, was at last about to be made public.

Mr. Jessup unfolded it before them. Within it was a sealed paper, which, according to the deceased's directions, was to be read before the will. It was written in Mrs. Garston's own stiff hand. Mr. Jessup explained that Mrs. Garston had handed him this paper sealed up, giving him no intimation of what the contents might be—only directions to put it with her will, and read it first. The lawyer looked at it with evident interest. His audience listened eagerly. It turned out to be a sort of will, or transcript of her will, interspersed with various remarks, and curiously worded.

"Whereas" (it began, after a few introductory sentences) "Thomas Kage refuses obstinately to be my heir, as I wished and intended to make him, I dispose of my property amidst others, and I do it unwillingly."

"To Richard Dunn five thousand pounds. He is an honest man, and has been my good friend.

"To Charlotte Lowther, the step-daughter of my late dear friend Lady Kage, five thousand pounds.

"To Dr. Tyndal five hundred pounds.

"To Mr. Jessup, my lawyer, five hundred pounds.

"Legacies to all my servants—as my will specifies. They have been faithful.

"To Olive Canterbury my case of diamonds, in remembrance of Harry Lynn-Garston. There are few young women I respect as I do Olive Canterbury.

"To Millicent Canterbury my set of pearls, and the emerald ring that I am in the habit of wearing on my little finger.

"To Lydia Dunn a plain Bible and Prayer-book, which my executors will purchase—hoping she will read and profit by them.

"To Keziah Dawkes an annuity of one hundred pounds for her life. Also a present sum in ready-money of two hundred and fifty pounds; to be paid to her within twenty-one days of my death, free of legacy duty. Also my set of corals and the

two rings lying in the same case. Also four of my best gowns (she is to choose them) and the black-velvet mantle, and the lace that is contained in the top drawer of the ebony miniature set of drawers in the blue bedroom. Keziah Dawkes would have had three hundred a-year instead of one, but for the way in which she has joined Barby in deceiving me through a course of years.

"To Thomas Charles Carr Kage I leave these two houses—this and the one he lives in. He has been as a son to me these many years, and I thought to make him heir to the greater portion of my money. He refuses absolutely—having had enough of unjust wills, he says, in old Canterbury's—but I know that he would have used the money well. If he refuses these houses, I direct that they shall be razed to the ground. It is my earnest desire that he should not refuse; and I cannot think he will so far disregard my last wishes as to do so.

"To various charities, as specified in my will, I leave five thousand pounds.

"Barnaby Dawkes. I declare in this my last testament, that it never was in my thoughts to make Barnaby Dawkes my heir. Had he shown himself worthy of it, I would have left him amply well off; but my heir he never would have been. As he is unworthy, he will not find himself much the better for me. I bequeath to him an annuity of two hundred and eight pounds; and I further bequeath to him a further present sum of five hundred pounds, free of duty, to be paid to him within twenty-one days of my death.

"The rest of my property I leave to Arthur Lynn-Garston, and make him my residuary legatee. And I appoint Richard Dunn and himself my executors.

"MARGARET GARSTON."

Arthur Lynn-Garston looked up in mute astonishment. He had not expected to be remembered at all: certainly not to this large amount. But this was not the true will. Very rapidly the lawyer was proceeding to read that, as if desirous not to give time for comment.

It proved, so far as the bequests went, a counterpart of the paper. And Barnaby Dawkes's legacy of two hundred

and eight pounds a-year was to be paid to him by weekly instalments.

"That's all," said the lawyer, folding it up.

Keziah's pale lips were trembling. She approached him with an angry tone. "You told me Mrs. Garston made some alteration in my brother's favour only a week before she died. Where is it?"

"I did not say whether it was in his favour or against him, Miss Dawkes: only that it concerned him," replied Mr. Jessup, in a low tone. "The alteration Mrs. Garston desired me to make was this—that Major Dawkes's annuity of two hundred pounds should be increased to two hundred and eight; and be paid to him weekly. She remarked that Mrs. Dawkes would not live for ever, and he might come to want bread-and-cheese."

What could Keziah answer? Nothing. But her face took an ashy turn in the room's shaded light.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MRS. DAWKES AT HOME.

The clocks were chiming the quarter before midnight, as a gentleman splashed through the mud and wet of the London streets, on his way to a private West-end gambling-house. It was the barrister, Thomas Kage. He was not given to frequenting such places on his own account, but he was in urgent search of one who was—a man he had once called friend, and who had brought himself into danger. Not a cab was to be had, and his umbrella was useless. Glad enough was he to turn into the dark passage that led to the house's entrance, and shake the wet from his clothes. Dark, cold, and gloomy as it was here, inside would no doubt be all light and warmth, and he was about to give the signal which would admit him, when the door was cautiously opened, and two gentlemen came forth. One of them—he was in regimentals—wore a scowling aspect. It was Major Dawkes; earlier in the evening he had been to an official dinner, which accounted for his dress.

More and more addicted had he become to that bad vice, gambling; the worst vice, save one, that man can take to himself; and this night he had lost fearfully. To lose money now was, in the major's case, simply madness; but the fatal spell was upon him, and he could not shake it off.

Not caring to be seen, Mr. Kage drew into a dark corner. At the same moment from the opposite corner stepped one who must have been waiting there.

"Major," said this latter gentleman, "I must speak to you."

"What the—mischief—brings you here?" demanded Major Dawkes, with a hard word.

"I have waited for you two mortal hours. I was just in time to see you enter; and got threatened by the door-keepers for insisting upon going in after you. I had not the password. Can I speak a word with you, major?"

"No, you can't," was the defiant answer of the major. But that he had taken rather more wine than was good for him, he might have been civil for prudence' sake. "I'll hear nothing. Go and talk to Jessup."

"Major Dawkes, this will not do. You know perfectly well that Jessup won't have anything to do with the affair; 'twould soil his hands, he says."

"You know where I live," stamped the major. "Come there, if you want to see me. Pretty behaviour this, to waylay an officer and a gentleman."

"Excuse me, major, but if you play at hide-and-seek——"

"Hide-and-seek!" interupted Major Dawkes. "What do you mean, sir?"

"It looks like it," returned the other, with a significant cough. "You can never be seen at your house, and you will not answer our letters. It has not been for pleasure that I have waited here, like a lackey, this miserable night; we might have sent a clerk, but I came myself, out of regard to your feelings. If I cannot speak with you, I will give you into custody; and you know the consequences of that."

Though not quite himself, the major did know the consequences. Drawing aside into the dark corner that the lawyer —as he evidently was—had come out of, a few whispered words passed between them.

"To-morrow, then, at twelve, at our office," concluded the lawyer. "And you will do well to keep the appointment, major, this time," he significantly added. "If you do not, we will not wait another hour."

The speaker turned out of the passage into the pool at its entrance, and then waded through other pools down the street. Major Dawkes and his friend stood watching him. The major's cab waited, but his man, probably not expecting him so soon, was in the public-house round the corner. Somebody else's man flew to fetch him.

"Horrid wretches these creditors are!" cried the major's friend in warm sympathy. "But it is the most incomprehensible thing in the world, Dawkes, that you should suffer yourself to be bothered in this way. Of course it is no secret that you are up to your eyes in embarrassment; there's not a fellow in the regiment owes half what you do for play, let alone other debts. Why don't you pay up, and get clear?"

"Where's the money to do it?" retorted the major. "I don't possess a mine of gold."

"But your wife does. She has thousands and thousands and thousands a-year. Where does it all go to?"

"Nonsense! My wife's income is not half so much," peevishly said Major Dawkes, possibly oblivious that no particular sum had been specified. "It might be, if her child died."

"Ah, yes, I forgot; the best part of the ingots are settled on little Canterbury. Can't you touch a few of his thousands?"

"No; or I should not have waited until now to do it. His thousands are tied up to accumulate. His will be a lordly fortune by the time he is of age."

"But with so much money in the family—your own son's, as may be said—surely there are ways of getting at it. You might have the use of some to clear you, and pay it back at your leisure."

"So I would, if it were not for the boy's trustee," returned the major. "He's as tight a hand as you could find. The point was put to him some weeks ago; I broached it myself, not taking Mrs. Dawkes into my counsels; and Kage cut me short with a haughty denial. He's a regular curmudgeon."

Little thought the major that the "curmudgeon" was in the dark passage behind him and his confidential friend. To play the eavesdropper was particularly objectionable to Thomas Kage, but he would very decidedly have objected to show himself just now.

"But if things are like this, Dawkes, how on earth can you expect to get clear?" demanded his friend.

The major did not answer. He bared his brow for a moment to the damp air: a whole world of care seemed to be seated there.

"Pull up while there's time, Dawkes," was the prudent advice next offered. "How can you go on, plunging farther into the mud, at the rate you do? To-night you must have lost——"

"It is in my nature to spend, and spend I must, let who will suffer," fearlessly interrupted the major.

"Well," said the other candidly, "it does seem hard that a sickly child should be keeping you out of this immense wealth."

So hard did it seem, that Major Dawkes gave a curse to it in his heart; and another curse, spoken, to his servant, who now dashed up. He entered his cab, and giving his friend a lift, was driven away, whilst Mr. Kage was admitted to the hidden mysteries of the house. But with his business there we have nothing to do.

Several weeks had gone on since Mrs. Garston's death, when we last saw Major Dawkes. How *he* had gone on was a different affair altogether, and not so easy to discern. At that time he had thought it an impossibility that many days could pass over his head without the mine, he always trod on, exploding; and yet they *had*: the flame had only been smouldering until now. But things were growing more ominous hour by hour; and perhaps the major continued to enter into undesirable expenses as much to drown care as from infatuation.

Mrs. Dawkes had been ill—seriously so. A return of the chest attack she had had early in the spring came on; the result of late hours and her own imprudence, as the doctors told her. She was not strong naturally, and she was doing what she could, in the shape of turning night into day in her pursuit of

gaiety, to bring her lack of strength conspicuously forth. For three weeks she had been confined to her bed, but was getting better now.

When Major Dawkes's cab deposited him at his house in Belgravia—returning now to the present night, making itself so agreeable with rain—he ascended at once to his bedroom; one he had been occupying temporarily since his wife's illness. It was on the floor above hers, and immediately opposite the day-nursery of little Tom Canterbury. Putting off his regimentals and other things as quickly as he could, the major got into bed. But not to sleep; anxiety prevented that. He had taken nothing since leaving the gambling-house, and his brain was growing somewhat clearer. It is at these moments that any trouble that a man may have shows itself with redoubled force. Time had been when Major Dawkes sent away trouble with what he had an hour before bestowed upon his servant—a curse. He was of a selfish, reckless nature, and would not let things worry him. Ah, but *then* his worst trouble had been debt; now it was something else, and he had dwelt on it until it had made him painfully nervous. His position was looking fearfully black, and the major did not see how to improve it. In saying he was by nature a spendthrift, Barnaby Dawkes spoke only partial truth; it would have been more correct had he said by habit. To launch out into sinful expenses was only customary with him; but these expenses had at length brought their consequences behind them. Very unhappy was it for Barby Dawkes that the consequences did not consist of debt alone.

At the turn of the past Christmas, Major Dawkes, to get himself out of some frightful pit of embarrassment, obtained money upon a bill, which—which—had something peculiar about it, to speak cautiously; and which, later, perhaps no one would be found to own. So easy a way did it seem to Major Dawkes of relieving himself of a load of temporary care, that he tried the process again, and once or so again. *This* was the secret breathed to Keziah that night when the major visited her. This was the secret that Jessup, the lawyer, had access to. The major used superhuman efforts, and patched up matters for a time, and so averted an explosion. But the

secret had now been discovered by two or three most undesirable people who were interested, and public exposure was looming ominously near.

A firm had innocently discounted one of these bills—solicitors in sharp practice. One of the partners it was who had lain in wait for the major in the dark passage. Perhaps they might be induced to hush the affair up for "a consideration," in addition to all the money and expenses; otherwise they were threatening criminal proceedings; ay, and as the miserable major knew, they would inevitably keep their word. For the bill, you see, had somebody's name to it, and that somebody had never written it, or heard of it. That was only one of the bills; there were one or two more quite as doubtful. Other parties to whom the major was under terrible obligations, legal, if not criminal, had become tired out, and were about to take very unpleasant steps. What with one thing and another, it seemed to the man that a fortune almost as great as Tom Canterbury's was needed to extricate him. It was a perilous position; more than enough to disturb the major's rest. He knew quite well that if all came out that might come out—and there were matters besides the peculiar bills—things must be over with him. His wife would leave him; the army would drum him out of it; society would scout him.

"A nice state of affairs!" groaned the major. "Something must be done. What a fool I have been!"

Something! But what? The help he wanted was no slight sum; and he saw but one hope—and that not a real hope; only a possible one. A persistent mind, indeed, must be Major Dawkes's to cherish it still—though in fact he did not cherish it, but only glanced at it in sanguine moments; for it was the old scheme of getting some of the child's money from Mr. Kage. Only a few thousands out of the boy's large fortune, he would say to himself—only a few thousands! The thought of this fortune, so close at hand, yet so inaccessible to him—for, if the child died, you remember, the whole of it reverted to Mrs. Dawkes—had begun to be to the major as a very nightmare: it haunted his dreams, it haunted his daily thoughts; it was ever present with him, sleeping or waking. Like unto the gold-fever that fell on some of us years ago,

and sent us out to Australia little better than eager madmen, so had a gold-fever attacked Major Dawkes. As the value of a thing coveted is enhanced to a fabulous height by longing, and diminished by possession, so did this fortune of little Tom Canterbury's wear, to his stepfather, an aspect of most delusive glamour. In its attainment appeared to lie the panacea for all ills; the recompense for past and present troubles; a charming golden paradise.

Major Dawkes had a particular dislike to children; but in feigning a love for little Tom Canterbury before the marriage —to ingratiate himself with the child's mother—he had really acquired a liking for him. This in a degree wore off later; and he was often severe with the child—a mild, gentle little fellow whom any one might love—but on the whole he liked the boy. However, since this hankering after his fortune had arisen, Major Dawkes had almost grown to hate him, looking on him as a deadly enemy who stood between him and light.

In spite of his fast habits, few men living cared so much to stand well with the world as Barnaby Dawkes; certainly none so dreaded to stand ill with it. There was one ugly word moving ever before his mental sight in fierce letters of flame—F-o-r-g-e-r-y. Rather than have such a word brought home to him, he would have died—and Major Dawkes was very fond of life. It was not the act itself he repented, but the chance of exposure. Safe from that, he would have done the same thing over and over again to the end of time.

Dropping asleep towards morning, he dreamt that he was in the midst of some surging sea, whose waves were perpetually about to overwhelm him. He wanted to turn his head and look back, but the waves would not let him. He knew that some awful phantom was there in his pursuit, to overtake him unless he turned to confront it; and yet he could not do so. A fresh and curious epoch must have arrived in Major Dawkes's life when it came to dreams.

Remembering his engagement for the morning, Major Dawkes rose in time to keep it. *That* might no longer be ignored—as he knew too well. Swallowing his breakfast with what appetite he had, he took his departure.

Of the two, Barnaby Dawkes would rather have gone to an

hour's recreation in the pillory than to the appointment in the house of this legal firm, with the brand of guilt and shame on his forehead. And yet, in one sense, the interview must be utterly superfluous. All the argument in the world would only have amounted to this—that the full indemnity money must be produced, or the major would be made a nine-days' spectacle. He knew it himself as he dashed there in his carriage, driving his high-mettled horses. Humble pedestrians, glancing admiringly up from the pavement, thought what a great man the Jehu must be, and how silky was his fine black moustache; but they could not read his heart, or see the cankering care eating it away.

The carriage drew up in Lincoln's Inn, and the major went in to purgatory. The consultation was a pretty long one; the lawyers were uncompromising, and the client was almost helpless; but he argued and denied and equivocated; and then they rang a bell, and desired a clerk to hold himself in readiness to perform a certain mission at Scotland Yard. The major was brought metaphorically to his knees, and he came forth at length with a knitted brow.

"Where the devil am I to get it?" was the puzzling question put to himself, and spoken unconsciously aloud as he ascended to his carriage. Again and again he saw but one solitary opening—appealing to Mr. Kage. Look where he would, around the whole wide world, he saw no other.

He drove straight home, regardless of a pelting shower that was coming down upon him, and found a bevy of visitors in the drawing-room. Mrs. Dawkes, lovely still, but pale from her recent illness, sat in their midst, her attire—mauve colour—charming as usual; a lame apology for mourning, worn for Mrs. Garston. Talking with one, laughing with another, exacting admiration from all: an adept was she in the wiles and the petty nothings of frivolous existence.

The major saw no chance of private conversation with her then, and closed the door with a suppressed growl, not caring whether he had been perceived by the guests or not.

When these idlers were gone and the sun was shining again, Mrs. Dawkes called for her boy. He had been sitting on the stairs, patient, loving child, hoping for the summons. Indulged

though he was by his mother, never was there a more obedient, modest, good little son than he, never presuming upon her affection. He wore a Scotch dress, and his fair curls floated on his neck: nearly seven years old now, he scarcely looked his age. Mrs. Dawkes once said to Mr. Kage that the child had a strange affinity with her; if she drooped, he drooped. Certain it was that, during this recent illness of hers, the boy had seemed pale, languid, anything but well. Exceedingly delicate he looked to-day, as she took him on her knees.

"Did you eat a good dinner, Tom?"

"Oh yes, mamma."

"What did you have?"

"Some fowl and some custard-pudding and jam. I've been reading my fairy-tales since. Judith's mending my puzzle."

"Is she getting ready to take you out, Tom? It's time."

"I told her I wouldn't go," said Tom. "I would rather stay with you, mamma. When will you come out with me again?"

"When this showery weather is over," replied Mrs. Dawkes, who had not been allowed to go out-of-doors since her illness. "But, Tom——"

What she had been about to say was arrested by the appearance of Major Dawkes. Putting his head in to reconnoitre, and seeing the room now clear of visitors, he came forward.

"Caroline," said he, "send Tom away. I want to speak with you."

"Is it something you cannot say before him?" she asked; for there was no longer much cordial feeling in her heart for her husband, though they maintained a show of civility.

"Are you so infatuated with that child that you cannot bear him out of your sight?" angrily demanded the major, who was in a most wretched mood, and particularly bitter against the boy.

Mrs. Dawkes was surprised: his ebullitions of temper had usually been restrained in her presence. She did not condescend to retort.

"Go to that table, Thomas, and amuse yourself with that large picture-book," she said, pointing to the far end of the room, where he would be out of hearing. "What is it?" she apathetically said, addressing her husband.

"My dear, you must pardon me; I am in much trouble and perplexity," resumed the major, remembering that to provoke his wife was not exactly the best way to attain his ends. "It is frightful trouble, Caroline; and nothing less."

"Oh, indeed. Have you broken your horses' knees? I saw you drive away rather furiously this morning."

"I have been answering for the debts of a brother-officer, Caroline, and have got into difficulties through it," he avowed, having mentally rehearsed the tale he meant to tell.

"Rather imprudent in you to do so, was it not?" interrupted Mrs. Dawkes.

"I suppose it was, as things have turned out; for he died, and it has fallen on me."

"The liability?"

The major nodded. "I have been trying to pay it off, as I could, and have run into debt myself in consequence. Caroline, my dear," he added in a sepulchral tone, "your husband is a ruined man."

To Mrs. Dawkes, who had a splendid country mansion and some thousands a-year in her own right, of which no one's imprudence could deprive her, husband or no husband, the above announcement did not convey the dismay it would to many wives. Not to mince the matter, the major, looking at her from the corner of his eye, saw that it had made no impression whatever.

"How will you get out of the mess?" quoth she.

"I can get out of it in two ways. One is by paying up; the other, by shooting myself."

"Ah," said she equably, "people who *talk* of shooting themselves rarely do it. Don't be an idiot, Barnaby."

"Caroline," he rejoined in a tone that was certainly agitated, "if I make light of it to you, it is to save you vexation: but I speak literally and truly, that I must pay, or—or—disappear somewhere—either into the earth or over the seas."

"What can be done?" she inquired, after a pause of consideration. "We have no ready-money to spare: our expenses seem to swallow up everything. Often I can't make it out."

"*Our* ready-money would not suffice. The poor fellow was inextricably involved; and," he added, dropping his voice to a

faint whisper, "ten or twelve thousand pounds would not more than pay it."

Mrs. Dawkes gave a scream of dismay. As to the "ten or twelve thousand," the major did not think it prudent to mention a higher sum then, but that would prove but a sop in the pan.

"But for that deceitful old aunt of mine dying, and leaving me nothing in her will (I hope there's a Protestant Purgatory, and that she's in it!), I should never have had occasion to tell you this. Indeed, but for the expectation of inheriting her fortune, I should not have answered for the poor fellow."

"What is to be done?" repeated Mrs. Dawkes, returning to the practical consideration of the dilemma, and leaving the bygone "expectation" in abeyance; for it was a question upon which she and he entertained opposite opinions.

"One thing can be done, Caroline; you can help me out—if you will."

"I!" she repeated.

"You can get Tom's trustee, Kage, to let me have the money. I will repay it as soon as I possibly can. There will be no difficulty in that, and no risk."

"He will not do it."

"He will, if you bid him. For me he would not."

"He never will," she repeated. "I know Thomas Kage too well. He is the most perfectly straightforward, honourable man breathing: ridiculously so. I am right, Barnaby, cross as you look over it. Tom's money is not his to lend, and I am sure he would not advance a pound of it."

Major Dawkes nearly lost his temper. It was a way of meeting the request that he did not at all admire.

"Will you ask Kage?"

"No. Ask him yourself."

"An ill-conditioned worthless man! He never ought to have been made the boy's trustee," spoke the major in suppressed anger.

Mrs. Dawkes smiled equably. "If you were but half as worthy as he!"

"Will you lend it me?" demanded the major.

"I have not the power. And if I had, I would not suffer Tom's money to be played with."

"You have this much power: any request preferred to Kage by you, and made a point of, would be complied with."

"Nonsense! I'll do nothing of the kind. My child is my child, and his interests are identified with mine. You should not get into these liabilities. No man would, with common foresight, unless he knows that he will have the means to meet them."

Angry and wroth, Major Dawkes broke out in a temper. The little boy, most sensitively timid, shivered at the raised voices, left his picture-book and stole forward, halting in the middle of the room.

"You see now how necessary it is that Tom's trustee should be a man of firmness, that he may guard against such emergencies as the present," spoke Mrs. Dawkes rather tauntingly—at least so it sounded to the major's pricking ears. "I am very sorry, Barnaby, that you should have got yourself into this dilemma; but it is not my boy's money that can extricate you from it."

Biting his lips to control his fury, Major Dawkes turned round and stepped against the child, not knowing he stood there. It wanted but that encounter to set him off. Out came the passion.

"You little villain," he cried with an imprecation, "do you dare to stand between me and—and—your mother? There's for you!"

It was a cruel blow he struck the child, and it felled him to the ground. Quite beside himself in the blind hatred of the moment, in irrepressible passion, Major Dawkes gave him a kick as he lay—one of contempt more than of violence—and went from the room, a furious man. Mrs. Dawkes raised the boy in her arms, and tottered to a seat; weak from her late illness, it was indignation that gave her strength to bear him. For several minutes neither of them spoke. The child sobbed on her neck, she sobbed on his.

"Mamma, what had I done?"

"You had done nothing, my darling. He wants to spend your money," she added in her indignant resentment.

"Oh, mamma, let him have it; let us go away from here! Papa is never kind to me now."

"Yes, we *will* go away," she emphatically rejoined. "We will go to the Rock, my boy: your own home, and mine. If papa likes to follow us, and behave himself, he may; and if not, he can stay where he is."

"Let papa have my money," repeated Tom Canterbury. "I don't care for money."

"You do not understand, dear. The money is Mr. Kage's at present; he would not give it to Major Dawkes if he asked him ever so."

In came Judith at this juncture, ready to attend Master Canterbury on his walk. She saw the tears and the red eyes. "Why, what has taken him now?" cried she in surprise.

"He has been vexed," replied Mrs. Dawkes, hastily; "a little thing seems to vex him now. I don't think he can be quite well, Judith."

"It's the warm weather, ma'am," said Judith. "He'll get up all right after a bit. What he wants is fresh country air."

"And he shall have it too. The streets are damp after the rain, Judith," continued Mrs. Dawkes, "too damp for him to walk. You had better order the carriage."

So the carriage came round, and the young heir of the Rock was driven away in it to take the air, his nurse sitting opposite to him.

When the sound of the wheels had faded away on the ear, Major Dawkes entered the drawing-room. He was ready to strike himself down, as he had struck the boy, for giving way to so impolitic a gust of passion. His wife listened to his apologies in haughty silence.

"Caroline, believe me, I was betrayed out of my senses; but it arose from over-anxiety for your peace and comfort."

"It is for my peace and comfort that you ill-treat my child!" sarcastically rejoined Mrs. Dawkes.

"He is an angel, and I love him as such," proclaimed the major, emphatically. "I was in a whirlwind of passion, Caroline, and did not know in the least what I did. I was agonized at the prospect before you: yes, my dear, before *you;* for if I can't pay that poor dead man's creditors, they'll

come in. Into this very house, and seize upon it, and all that is in it."

"Seize our house and all that is in it!" exclaimed Mrs. Dawkes, in an access of consternation.

"Every earthly thing the walls contain."

"Will they seize me and Tom?"

Major Dawkes gave vent to a dismal groan; but for his state of mind it would have been a laugh. Mrs. Dawkes, shielded always from this species of the world's frowns, utterly inexperienced, had put the question in real earnest.

"They wouldn't touch you or Tom, my dear; but they would take every stick and stone in the place. They are frightful harpies. You would be left here with bare rooms, and I should be in prison, unable to protect you. It is not that; think of the shock such a scandal would cause in society!"

The last sentence told on her ear. Society? Ay, there's the terrible bugbear of civilized life. What will society think? What will society say? But for society our "sticks and stones" would often be lost with less intense pain than they are. Major Dawkes enlarged upon the frightful prospect, painting the scenes in strong colours, until his wife shrank from it as much as he did. Writing a note, she despatched it by a servant to Mr. Kage's chambers.

When little Tom Canterbury arrived home from his drive, his stepfather lifted him from the carriage himself, and carried him in to his mother. He did feel sorry for having struck the blow.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A FLOOD OF SUNLIGHT.

Sitting alone together in the evening twilight, Mrs. Dawkes explained the embarrassment to Thomas Kage, who had answered her summons speedily. Years ago—he remembered it well, and so did she—he had bid her send for him, if in need of counsel, at any hour of the day or night. That is, she

explained the embarrassment as far as she was cognizant of it; and then preferred the request—that Mr. Kage would advance some twelve thousand pounds of Tom's money to her husband.

"Major Dawkes has been prompting you to ask this," was the barrister's answer.

"He pressed me to ask it to-day. I refused to do so at first, and it caused an unpleasant scene between us," she said, her cheek reddening with the remembrance. "But when he explained the frightful position we are in—that rude rough men, harpies he called them, will break in here and seize our things, and leave the house empty, of course it startled me into feeling that something must be done to prevent it. The major says they'll bring vans to take the furniture away, and pitch beds and such out of the window into the street. Only think the uproar the neighbourhood would be in, seeing that."

"Caroline," rejoined Mr. Kage, in low tones, "when I finally decided to act as the child's trustee—and you know I at first wished to decline it—one reason for my doing so was, that I might identify myself with, and protect, his interests. I informed you that I should never, under any inducement, be prevailed upon to advance you, or any future husband you might take, or any other person whatsoever, any portion of the money. You must remember this?"

"Certainly, I remember it; it is not so long ago."

"Then, remembering this, how can you prefer such a request as the present? I have foreseen that a man, with your husband's extravagant habits, would probably become embarrassed, and——"

"*Did* you?" interrupted Caroline, in great surprise. "I'm sure he has had enough to spend. But this trouble is not caused by the major's own debts; they are liabilities he has entered into for a brother-officer."

Mr. Kage looked at her. "Did Major Dawkes tell you this?"

She knew her cousin well, every tone of his countenance and voice.

"Thomas, you don't believe this!"

"I prefer not to discuss the matter with you, Caroline."

"Whichever way it may be, however contracted, the debts are not the less real," she continued; "and nothing but the

scandal likely to arise in our home would have induced me to apply to you for a loan of Tom's money. Will you let him have it?"

"No. And I am sorry that Major Dawkes should have suggested this to you. He had already had a decisive negative from me."

"Has he asked you before?"

"Yes. Several weeks ago."

"Oh, indeed," she uttered in a tone of pique; pique against her husband. "He might have had the grace to consult me first, considering whose money it is."

Mr. Kage had thought so at the time. He made no remark.

"You will advance it now, Thomas, for my sake."

"I would do a great deal for your sake, Caroline; but not this. I will not be a false trustee, or part with my own integrity."

Some thought, some recollection, came over Mrs. Dawkes, and she betrayed for a moment vivid emotion. Thomas Kage took up a book that lay on the table and turned over its leaves. He would not so much as glance at her.

"What am I to do, if people do come in here and take the furniture?"

"Go to the Rock, Caroline; that is my advice to you. Go at once, and leave the major to fight out the battle with his creditors!"

"They cannot come into the Rock?" she exclaimed in sudden apprehension.

"Certainly not. The major's liabilities could no more touch that, or anything it contains, than mine could. It is yours for use until your boy shall be of age: after that, his absolutely."

"But would not the seizing these things be like a lasting disgrace?"

"It is a disgrace occurring every day in families higher in position than yours, and it is thought little of. But in this case, Caroline, no disgrace will be reflected on *you*. You are shielded from it by your own position. It is a peculiar one. You have your large fortune; you are in possession of the Rock. The major's embarrassments cannot touch you; they are his own exclusively, and people so regard them."

"Regard!" she interrupted, quickly taking up the word. "Are they already known?"

"Somewhat of them, I fancy. But I ought to have said 'will regard,' for I was thinking of the contingency we have been speaking of. If these things must go, let them go, Caroline: it may serve as a warning to the major to be prudent in future."

"Thomas, you know that all the things are mine. They were bought with my money."

"They were purchased in his name, and the law can take them."

"That's a great shame. The law must know they really belong to me."

"There was no marriage settlement, you see, Caroline."

"Well, well, I know how stupid *that* was; no good going over it again."

"None in the world. I am sorry your husband should have troubled you with this."

"He said if he could not have the money he would shoot himself," said Mrs. Dawkes.

Mr. Kage's eyes twinkled with a merry expression. "I remember, some years ago, when the major was in want of money, he said he must have it, or drown himself. I don't think he had it; and he is alive yet. Tell him, Caroline, he will do well to forget that Tom has money. And do you go at once to the Rock, where the major's grievances cannot disturb your peace."

"It has just come to what I anticipated; for I did not really expect you would advance him any," she observed with equanimity; "and I know you are right. But won't he be in a passion when I tell him!"

"I will tell him myself, if you like," said Mr. Kage. "Indeed, I would prefer to do so."

Mrs. Dawkes acquiesced, glad to have the matter taken out of her hands. And the next day the bewildered major received a short decisive note, which convinced him that all hope from that quarter was really over. Many a time since has Thomas Kage asked himself the question, whether, if Major Dawkes had gone to him and revealed the whole truth of his peril, and pleaded to him for salvation, as a man just condemned some-

times pleads to the judge for his life—whether he might have been tempted to prove false to his trust, and save him. And he has always been thankful that the difficulty was not brought before him.

The next scene fated to be enacted in the drama was the illness of little Tom Canterbury. Not quite immediately did Mrs. Dawkes act on Mr. Kage's advice—to go to the Rock. She could not tear herself all at once from her fashionable friends; and she had a ready excuse in the fact that she was yet rather weak for travel. Just a few days she intended should elapse first. Ere they were over, Tom was taken ill with a malady he had been attacked with before—inflammation of the chest. He was in great danger. Mrs. Dawkes hung over him, scarcely quitting his bedside; now giving way to hope, now to all the anguish of despair. But see you not what a flood of sunlight this same dangerous illness opened to the major? It could not be said, perhaps, that he positively prayed for the child to die; but the possibility lay on his heart continually in a sort of wild wish, never leaving it. To temporize much longer with those men whom he so terribly feared would not be in his power.

Mrs. Dawkes sat at the child's bedside, the silk curtain drawn between him and the meridian sun. There appeared to be little doubt that he was dying. A wan white face, it was, laid on the pillow, the blue eyes half closed, the fair hair falling around. One hand, stretched out on the counterpane, held the mother-of-pearl shell given him by Belle Annesley. It was open; and the vivid colouring of the angels' robes in the picture, bearing the child to heaven, shone brightly in a stray sunbeam that fell across the bed. It was strange the hold that this simple toy had taken—or rather the picture it contained—on the imagination of the boy: he was, in good truth, too susceptible. He had been lying for some time without moving, his mother watching him, tears in her eyes, a dull pain in her aching heart, when the eyes fully opened, and some slight animation appeared in the still face.

"Let him have my money, mamma."

The words, suddenly breaking on the previous stillness, startled Mrs. Dawkes. She did not quite catch his meaning.

"Let who have your money, my darling?"

"Papa. Oh, let him have it! He won't be angry with you then."

She understood now. His mind was running on that unhappy scene of a short time before, when Major Dawkes had struck him down, and terrified him with furious words. It had laid hold of his imagination for ill.

"We shall not want money in heaven, mamma."

"No, that we shall not."

"And heaven's better than the Rock."

"Much better," she said from the depths of her weary heart.

"I wish I was there," sighed the child. "See how good the angels are!"—with a movement of the shell towards her. "They take us up without any pain."

"Tom, my darling, don't talk of dying. It will break my heart."

But the boy did not seem to heed the words. He lay with his eyes wide open, as if looking for something in the distance, presently repeating again the burden of his song.

"I wish I was there. It is full of flowers and sunshine; and no one is cruel; Jesus will not let them be. Mamma, I wish I was there." And Mrs. Dawkes bent her anguished brow on the pillow by his side. The wish sounded in her ears like an ominous prevision.

In the afternoon Major Dawkes came up. Tom was worse then; lying almost without motion, and breathing with difficulty.

"There is no further hope; I am sure of it," moaned Mrs. Dawkes, in her heartfelt anguish.

The major felt entirely of the same opinion. He was looking at the small white face, when one of the servants appeared and cautiously beckoned him out. He was wanted downstairs.

"You did not say I was in?" muttered the major, after closing the door on the sick-room.

"The gentleman would not listen to me, sir. He walked straight in, when I answered the door, and sat down in the dining-room. He says he shall sit there till he sees you. It is Mr. Rosse."

Major Dawkes nearly fainted. Mr. Rosse was a lawyer, and

one of those dangerous enemies he so dreaded. Go to him he was obliged: and yet—he scarcely dared. He shrank from the interview like the veriest coward.

"You are worse than a fool, Richards," foamed the major. "If you cannot contrive to keep people out of my house that I don't want to see, you may quit my service."

"It's not possible to keep the door barred, sir, with visitors and doctors and other people coming to it perpetual," was all the answer Richards ventured to make.

The conference was a stormy one, though carried on in cautious tones, and with closed doors. Things had come to an extremity.

"Only a few days more; only a day or two!" implored Major Dawkes, wiping his forehead, which had turned cold and damp. "It is impossible that he can survive, and then I shall have thousands and thousands at command, and will amply recompense you. You have waited so long, you can surely accord me this little additional grace: I will pay the bill twice over for it, and twice to that."

"Upon one plea or another we have been put off from day to day and from week to week. This may be as false an excuse as the others have been."

"But it is not a false excuse; the child is lying upon his bed, dying. If Mrs. Dawkes were not with him, you might go up and see for yourself that it is so. Hark! that is the physician's step."

The physician it was; he had been upstairs, and was coming down again. Major Dawkes threw wide the door of the dining-room.

"Doctor, what hope is there? I fear but little."

"There's just as much as you might put in your hand and blow away," replied the doctor, who was a man of quaint sayings, and knew that Major Dawkes bore no blood relationship to the child. "The only hope that remains lies in the elasticity of children; they seem ready to be shrouded one hour, and are running about the room the next. We can do nothing more for our little patient; and if he does rally, it will be owing to this elasticity, this tenacity of life in the young. I do not think he will."

The doctor passed out at the hall-door, and the major turned to his visitor. "You hear what he says; now will you give me the delay?"

"Well, under the circumstances—one day longer," replied the lawyer, whose firm would prefer their money, even to the exposure of the major. Let them once get clear of Major Dawkes, and he might swindle all the bill-brokers in London afterwards for what they cared. He stepped across the hall towards the door, and the major attended him.

"But if the child should not die—if he should recover—what then?" Mr. Rosse suddenly stopped to ask.

The major's heart and face alike turned sickly at the supposition; it was one he dared not dwell upon—literally *dared* not.

"There is no 'if' about it; he is quite sure to die. When I was up with him just now, he looked at the last gasp; the nurse thought he was dead then, up to the knees. I'll drop you a note as soon as it's over."

Night drew on. The child lay in the same state—his eyes closed, and quite unconscious—battling with death. The medical men came and went, but they could render no assistance; and it seemed pretty certain that no morning would dawn for little Tom Canterbury. Mrs. Dawkes would sit up with him, in spite of her husband's remonstrances, who told her that the incessant fatigue and watching would make her ill again. He went to rest himself, and slept soundly; for his troubles seemed at an end. The sick-room, as may be remembered, was near his own; and Major Dawkes was suddenly aroused by a movement in it. He heard the nurse come out, call to Richards, and tell him to run for the doctor. The man had been kept up all night, to be ready if wanted. The major looked at his watch—five o'clock.

"It's over at last," thought he. "What a mercy! I did not think he'd hold out so long. Ah, they may send, but doctors cannot bring the dead to life. And now I am a free man again!"

He would not go into the death-chamber; he did not care to witness death-scenes; and it would be time enough to condole with Mrs. Dawkes by-and-by. So he lay, indulging a charming

vision of the golden paradise which had at length opened to him, which was partly imagination, partly a semi-dream. The return of Richards disturbed him. He heard the latch-key placed in the door, and the man come up the stairs. Major Dawkes rose, put on his slippers, opened his door an inch or two, and arrested his servant.

"You have been round to the doctor's, Richards?"

"Yes, sir. He'll be here in a minute or two."

"There was no necessity to disturb him, only that it may be more satisfactory to your mistress. The child is dead, I suppose?"

"Dead, sir! no. He has took a turn for the better."

"What?" gasped Major Dawkes.

"He seems to have took a turn, sir, and has rallied; and that's why my mistress sent for the doctor."

"I—I—don't understand," cried the bewildered major. He really did not. So intense had been the conviction of the child's death that his mind was unable at once to admit any different impression.

"When the doctor was here the last thing, sir, he thought there might be a change in the night, for the better or the worse. If it was for the better, he was to be sent to, he said," explained Richards.

"And—it is for the better?"

"Oh dear, yes, sir, happily. Judith says she's sure he will get over it now."

Major Dawkes withdrew into his room, and softly closed the door. He felt as though the death-blow, which was to have overtaken the child, had missed its aim, and fallen upon him.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"DIED IN A FIT."

A WEEK elapsed; and little Tom Canterbury, owing, no doubt, to the "elasticity" spoken of by the doctor, appeared to be getting well rapidly. Mrs. Dawkes, heart and spirits alike raised, caring not even for folly and fashion in comparison with

her darling child, gave orders that preparations should be made for removal to the Rock. If the major was unable to leave London, he could remain behind, she obligingly told him; but Tom wanted country air, and Tom should have it.

To depart for the Rock, or to depart for Kamtschatka, would have seemed all one to the major, provided either place would shield him and his reputation. Scarcely once during this last week had he dared to show himself out of doors. His time had been chiefly spent in writing bulletins of little Canterbury's state to sundry people interested, every one of which represented the child as "slowly going." So long as this farce could be kept up, and his enemies be deceived into believing it, he felt tolerably safe. Tolerably only: it was Major Dawkes's misfortune never to feel quite assured upon the point at any moment, night or day. But, in fact, he was so. With the prospect of Tom Canterbury's thousands and tens of thousands slipping into his greedy fingers, to be squandered as Major Dawkes knew how to squander, people considered that it lay in their interests not to proceed to extremity with him. And such an extremity!

How harshly Fate was dealing with him in thus restoring Tom to life, Major Dawkes felt to the backbone. He looked upon it as a grievous wrong; an injury done him. In the perversion of mind caused by need, he had come to regard the fortune as his by right. Did it stand to any reason that this sickly infant ought to keep him out of what would put him straight with the world, and relieve him from this horrible nightmare? Children who died were happier than children who lived: little Tom wanted to go to heaven; he was saying so continually; and Heaven could not be kind when it thus renewed the lease of his poor frail life on earth.

So reasoned Major Dawkes. There were moments now when he wished *he* had died in his childhood, before worry and debt had come; and in pursuing this line of argument he was honest enough. But—*what was he to do?* Tom Canterbury's recovery could not be kept secret for ever. The period when it must be known was looming all too near, advancing close, even then, to his threshold. And it was bringing with it an abyss of agony and shame, than which to Major Dawkes nothing

could be more terrible. It seemed that he must forfeit life, rather than meet it.

At this, the week's end, the medical men pronounced it safe for Tom to travel. Mrs. Dawkes at once fixed the following morning for their departure; and gave the major that obliging permission, to go or stay behind, mentioned before. Soon after hearing it, Major Dawkes was crossing the hall, when a knock and ring startled him; startled him, as it seemed, to abject terror. His first impulse was to dart into the nearest room and bolt himself in; his next to dart out again and seize Richards' arm, who was coming along to open the door.

"Richards," he whispered—and the man stood amazed at the wild alarm, mingled with entreaty, in his master's aspect and accent—"don't open the door, for your life. Go into the area and see who it is. If it's any one for me, say I went out of town at seven this morning, and shan't be back till—till late to-night. Swear to it, man, if they dispute your word."

Richards descended the kitchen-stairs, and his master strode up the upper ones, four steps at a time, stealthily, silently, as a man who is flying from danger. Up to the second-floor went he, as if the higher he went the more secure he should feel from it. Instead of entering his own room, he turned into the one opposite, the day-nursery. It opened into the little boy's bedchamber, but the door was closed between them.

Judith stood at the round table by the fire—which Mrs. Dawkes thought well to have lighted daily, though summer weather had come in. She was measuring a dessert-spoonful of mixture from a small green medicine-bottle. Little Tom Canterbury was by her side, watching her.

"What's this?" asked Major Dawkes, taking up the bottle, when she had recorked it, and put it on the mantelpiece.

"I don't know, sir; I can't read writing," replied Judith, thinking the major meant the direction, which he was looking at. If he had meant anything, it was probably the mixture; but he had spoken in total abstraction, for his mind was a chaos just then.

"The Mixture. Master Canterbury," were the words written there.

"Does he require medicine still?" exclaimed Major Dawkes. "I thought he was well."

"It's only some stuff the doctor sends to comfort his inside, sir, which has been out of order," replied Judith. "He takes a spoonful three times a day: morning, afternoon, and before he goes to bed at night."

Major Dawkes took out the cork, smelt the mixture and tasted it, simply by way of doing something, while Tom drank up his spoonful. But, as Richards was heard coming up the stairs, the major hastily returned the bottle to the mantel-piece, and went out to meet him.

"Was I wanted?"

"Yes, sir. The gentleman was that one who never gives his name; and I saw two men standing off, as if they belonged to him," added Richards, in a confidential tone. "They are a-waiting opposite now."

"You said I was out of town?"

"I told him I'd take a oath to it, sir, if he liked—as you desired me. And he said it would be none nearer the truth if I did."

Major Dawkes wiped his damp brow and turned into his bedroom; his perplexities were growing fast and thick. This present matter was one of simple debt; and simple debt would have been as nothing compared with the other thing he dreaded. Exposure could not be more than a day's course off now.

"Agony, disgrace, punishment!" spoke he to his own soul, as he glanced at the future. "The abhorrence and contempt of my wife; the haughty condemnation of my brother-officers; the cool scorn of the world; the hulks for me! I am in dread danger of it all; and only because the weak thread of a wretched child's life is not broken! Why could he not have died? It was but the turn of the balance; a turn the other way, and—we should both have been the better. There has been a devil abroad since that night, ever at my elbow, whispering temptation."

Even so. And the devil had never stood closer to Major Dawkes than in this self-same moment. To give him his due, he struggled against the fiend as well as he knew how.

The major did not go out that day; he did not dare; what was to become of him on the next—and the next—and the next, he shuddered to contemplate. He dined at home with his wife at six o'clock, in her dressing-room. She felt very unwell, and had been lying there on the sofa all the afternoon.

"It is the fatigue of nursing Tom," said the major. "I knew it would bring its reaction."

"It is nothing of the sort," retorted Mrs. Dawkes. "I have taken a violent cold, or else caught Tom's complaint, for my chest feels sore. Country air will set both me and Tom to rights. We start in the morning. Do you intend to go with us?"

"I—I don't think I can," replied the miserable major.

He quitted the room after dinner; and went prowling about the house like a restless spirit, not venturing to go out before dusk. Mrs. Dawkes lay down on the sofa again and rang for her boy. Judith brought him, and her mistress began talking about the arrangements for the morning.

"The carriage will be at the door before half-past nine, you know, Judith."

"Yes, ma'am; I shall be quite ready. What about Master Tom's physic?" added Judith. "Had he better take it in the morning, ma'am?—there'll be just one dose left."

"No, I think not. To-night he must."

"Oh yes, I shall give it him as soon as he is undressed," said Judith, "and that won't be long first: it's ever so much after seven. I think he had better come now, ma'am, that he may have a good long night's rest. Master Tom, won't you say good night to your mamma?"

Of course it was right that the boy, still so weak and delicate, should have a good night's rest to fortify him for the morrow's journey. Mrs. Dawkes strained the child to her; and the child's little arms strained her. It was a long and close embrace, and he cried when he was taken from her: which was somewhat remarkable, as it was not a usual thing for him to do.

"God bless you, my darling! We shall both get well at the Rock."

Mrs. Dawkes, left alone, drank a cup of tea brought by her

maid, Fry, and then went into her bedroom to prepare for rest. She was irritable and impatient; so much so, that the maid asked whether she felt worse.

"Oh, I don't know!" was the querulous answer. "Since I drank that cup of hot tea, my tooth has begun to ache again. It is enough to distract me."

"I would have it out, ma'am, if I were you," cried Fry. "It's always a-distracting of you."

"Have it out! Have a tooth out at my age!" echoed Mrs. Dawkes, "I'd rather suffer martyrdom. Be quick over my hair, and don't say such things to provoke me."

So Fry went on with her duties, and her mistress went on groaning, and holding one side of her face.

"Perhaps, ma'am, if you were to put a little brandy to it, it might ease you," Fry ventured to say again. "Some cotton steeped in brandy, and put into the tooth, has cured many a toothache. Laudanum's best, but I suppose there's none in the house."

"It would do me no good," fretfully answered Mrs. Dawkes.

Fry left her mistress to rest. But there was no sleep for Mrs. Dawkes; the pain in her tooth prevented it. She tossed and turned from side to side, five minutes seeming to her like an hour.

Now it happened that there was some laudanum in the house; at any rate, some preparation of opium, though the maid had been unconscious of it. It had been brought in for some purpose several weeks before, and had stood since then in the major's dressing-room. Mrs. Dawkes, in a moment of desperation, rose from her bed, resolved to try it. Her own dressing-room opened on one side the bedchamber, the major's on the other; and she took the night-light which was burning—for Fry had closed the shutters to shut out all the remains of daylight—and went into the latter.

It was a very small place, little better than a closet, and had no exit except through the bedchamber. Her own dressing-room was large, and had two entrances. Over the major's washhand-stand was a narrow slab of white marble, and on that had stood the bottle required by Mrs. Dawkes. His tooth-powder box and shaving-tackle usually stood there; but since

he had occupied the room upstairs, they had been removed, with various other things belonging to him, the unused laudanum-bottle alone being left. Mrs. Dawkes went to the slab, and stretched forth her hand to take the bottle. Most exceedingly astonished was she to find that no bottle was there. The slab had nothing on it.

"Why, what can have become of it?" she exclaimed aloud. "The bottle is always there; I saw it there this very day. And the servants do not come in here since the room has been unused."

She looked about with the light, but could see nothing of it —the shelves and places were bare. Exceedingly cross, she returned to her bedroom, steeped a bit of cotton-wool in some spirits of camphor, put that to her tooth, and lay down again. The pain subsided at once, and she was dozing off to sleep, when some one came cautiously into the room from the passage-entrance. Mrs. Dawkes pulled aside the curtain, and saw her husband. He started back.

"Is it you?" she exclaimed.

"What brings you in bed now?" cried the major, looking still like a man startled.

"I could not sit up. I wish you wouldn't come disturbing me. Is it late or early?"

"It is not yet nine."

He went into his dressing-room as he answered, but came out again immediately, and stayed to speak.

"Caroline, I am going down to Kage about the matter we talked of the other day—to see if he won't help me. He ought, and he must."

"It will be of no use."

"At any rate, I shall try. I really want help very badly. Have you any message for him?"

"None," she answered drowsily. "I don't care to talk; it may set my tooth aching again."

"Well, good night; but I am sorry to have disturbed you. I shall see you in the morning."

The major descended the stairs. Calling up Richards, he gave him sundry commissions and injunctions; and then went out, peering into the dusk to see that the coast was clear.

Bolting round the corner and into a hansom, he ordered the driver to take him to Mr. Kage's house. There he learnt that the barrister was not expected until late, and would probably be found at his chambers. The hansom dashed down to the Temple. Mr. Kage was at work late. Rather surprised was he to see his visitor; much more surprised to hear what he had come for.

Why, what amount of impudence must the man possess, thus to persist in this annoyance! He had come to press for that loan again; and sat down and did it. Mr. Kage may be forgiven if he answered sharply.

"Thomas Canterbury's money!" echoed the major, in reply to some words. "You speak as though I asked for all his coffers, and the Rock into the bargain. I only wish to borrow a very trifling portion of it—three or four thousand pounds."

"The sum, more or less, is not of any consequence; but Mrs. Dawkes mentioned twelve thousand," spoke Thomas Kage, stiffly.

"Mrs. Dawkes must have mistaken what I said I should like, for what I said I wanted. From three to four thousand pounds will be sufficient."

"Were it but three thousand pence it would be all the same. I am surprised at you, Major Dawkes. Permit me to say that no gentleman would persist in these applications, in the teeth of my refusal and its reasons."

"I shall pay you back, long before little Canterbury is of age. Kage, my good fellow," added the major, wiping the perspiration from his brow—and, indeed, he had done little else since entering, for he seemed full of agitation—"consider the strait I am in. If I can't get money, and don't get money, there'll be nothing for it but—but—the Insolvent Court. Mrs. Dawkes would never hold up her head again."

A half-contemptuous smile crossed the barister's lips. He peremptorily declined further appeal on the subject. "Were the money my own, you should have had it before now," said he, finally; "but my trusteeship I will hold inviolate."

"Then to-morrow morning I must see about filing my petition," gloomily responded the major.

"Quite the best thing you can do," said Mr. Kage.

"Your cousin, Mrs. Dawkes, will have you to thank for it."

No reply to this. The major moved to the door as slowly as a bear. Mr. Kage took the lamp to light him downstairs. "I suppose Tom is all right again—getting stronger daily?" he observed, stretching the light out beyond the railings.

"Oh, he is quite well; he wants nothing now but change of air. His mother takes him to the Rock to-morrow. Good night to you."

The major jumped into the hansom that had waited for him, and was driven off. Having been immured indoors for days, he thought he needed some indemnifying recreation, and intended to "make a night of it."

The morning dawned brightly. At seven o'clock Fry was in her mistress's room, according to orders. Mrs. Dawkes did not like getting up at seven any more than do other people who are accustomed to lie late abed; but her child's welfare just now was paramount, and she was determined the journey should not be deferred through delay on her part, or on that of the household. She was gracious this morning, telling Fry that her toothache was gone and that she felt stronger altogether.

"Now, Fry, is everything ready?" she asked, while she dressed.

"*Quite* ready, ma'am," emphatically responded Fry; "leastways all that lies in my department to get ready. I am only too glad to be off to Chilling myself, ma'am. It seems an age since I saw my relations there. I'd like to see my poor old mistress, too."

Did Caroline Dawkes take that last sentence as a reproach to herself? It was not so meant. She rejoined, rather peevishly—

"In the sad state poor mamma lies, it is so very distressing to see her, you know, Fry. I'm sure I did not get over the pain for days, when I left her last. It is not good for her to see me, either. It excites her; the doctor says so."

"Very true, ma'am," acquiesced Fry.

"Is the major going with us or not, do you know?" resumed Mrs. Dawkes.

"I fancy not, ma'am. I don't think Richards has any orders about packing."

"That tells nothing. A gentleman's things can be put together in five minutes. The major must be called, Fry."

"The major did not sleep at home, ma'am."

"Not sleep at home?"

"And he is not come in yet," added Fry, who was no particular friend to the major, and had not the least objection to put in a word against him, if opportunity offered.

"How do you know he did not sleep at home?"

"Because, ma'am, his room is just in the state it was last night when the housemaid left it ready for him, with the door stark staring open."

Mrs. Dawkes, albeit caring very little for the major, was no better pleased than are other wives when told their husbands have not slept at home, and continued to dress in silence. Presently she sent Fry to see whether the nurse was getting up. Certain though she felt of the fact, it was as well to be on the safe side, and ascertain it. Judith had passed many nights of late in watching, and sleep might be reasserting its claims. While Fry was absent, she threw a warm wrapper over her petticoats, and went into the major's dressing-room to ring the bell there, knowing that it would bring up Richards. An unexpected object met her eyes.

Great as had been Mrs. Dawkes's surprise the previous night to find the laudanum-bottle absent from the slab, far, far greater was her present surprise to see it in the exact place it had always occupied, as if it had never been touched. Mrs. Dawkes mechanically took it in her hand: it was the veritable bottle, labelled as usual, "Tincture of Opium. Major Dawkes."

Had she only dreamt that she came to look for it?—the question really occurred to her. None of the servants had been through her room in the night. But on her own dressing-table lay the cotton and the phial of camphorated spirit, to prove that it was no dream.

"Judith has been up ever so long, ma'am, and she's soon going to dress Master Tom," said Fry, coming back. "There's Richards standing outside, saying the major's bell rang. I tell him his ears must have heard double."

Mrs. Dawkes went to the door. What she wanted with Richards was, to ask whether his master had said where he was going. Richards replied in the negative: he had supposed his master was coming home to sleep as usual. Mrs. Dawkes went back to her dressing-table, and sat down for Fry to begin her hair.

Directly afterwards the major came in, laughing gaily. He seemed determined to put a light face on the absence. His wife kept her head fixed under Fry's hands, looking neither to the right nor the left, not condescending to notice him in any way whatsoever.

"Did you think I had taken flight, Caroline? After leaving Kage, I went up to Briscoe's rooms. We got to cards; and, upon my word, the time passed so unconsciously, and it grew so late, that he gave me a bed. I feared I might disturb you, coming in between two and three o'clock."

Caroline did not see the point of the speech. All an excuse, thought she. Three o'clock was no absolutely unusual hour for the major to come in; and as for disturbing her, it was not her room he had to come to. "Very accommodating of Captain Briscoe to keep beds ready made-up for his friends," she coldly remarked.

"And that was a sofa," laughed the major. "You will have a splendid day for your journey. The wind is in its softest quarter for Tom."

"You don't go with us, then?"

"I wish I could. I dare say I shall follow you within the week."

"Oh, do you!" cried Mrs. Dawkes, her temper a little ruffled. "Just as you please."

Major Dawkes stood for a moment, watching the process of hairdressing. Caroline fancied he must want something, but would not ask.

"What of Mr. Kage? Did you see him?"

"I saw him. Had to go down to his chambers. He is a regular *rat*, Caroline; he will do nothing."

"I told you he would not," she gravely rejoined; "and he is quite right not to do it. As to a rat—if all people were as little like one, the world might be more comfortable than it is."

"Is that a slash at me?" asked Major Dawkes, smiling gaily, and seeming fully determined not to be put out. "I and Kage never could hit it off well together, you know, Caroline; therefore it was hardly likely he would go out of his way to do me a service. Perhaps I may get what I want through Briscoe. He——"

"Whatever is the matter?"

The interruption came from Fry, who at that moment was facing the door. The nurse, Judith, had stolen quietly inside the room, and was standing there with clasped hands, and face wild and white. Major and Mrs. Dawkes turned round.

"What do you want, Judith?" inquired her mistress.

"I got up at six, ma'am," began Judith, "and when I had dressed myself, I put up the things I had left last night, thinking I'd let the child sleep as long as I could. I said to myself, what a long night's rest he was having; what a beautiful sleep! And I—I—went to take him up now; and I—sir—ma'am—I can't awaken him." She had spoken just as she looked, in a wild, bewildered sort of manner; and she appeared to be shaking all over.

"It is the remains of his illness," remarked Mrs. Dawkes; but she gazed hard at Judith, thinking her manner, and her coming at all, very strange. "Children are sure to sleep well after an illness. Take him up gently; he will awake as you dress him."

"But I can't take him up, ma'am," returned the trembling Judith. "He—he—won't awake."

Fry stared at her with open mouth, privately persuaded that she had lost her senses.

"Will you please to come and see, sir?" added Judith, addressing her master.

"Nonsense, Judith; why should I come?" demanded the major. "Surely you don't want my help to arouse a sleeping child! Take him up yourself, as your mistress says. Splash a handful of cold water in his face; that will wake him soon enough."

"Oh, sir, come!" pleaded Judith. "Please come. Not you, ma'am."

The major left the room in answer to the appeal. No

sooner had he got out than Judith, shutting the door, seized upon his arm, and spoke in a whisper: "Sir, I think he's dead."

"What?" retorted the major, as if angry at her folly.

"It is so, sir, if ever I saw death yet. I did not dare to speak before my mistress. He is stiff and cold."

Major Dawkes pushed her aside with his elbow, and ascended the stairs, Judith at his heels. There was a noise behind, and they turned to look: Mrs. Dawkes and Fry were following them up.

"She had better not come in, sir," whispered Judith. "It may be too much for her."

The major went back to stop his wife. Judith stood at the room door. It was of no use. Caroline broke away from the detaining hand, and went resolutely onwards.

Thomas Canterbury was lying in his little bed, shaded by the purple-silk hangings, cold, white—and dead. The shell, with the angels carrying the child to heaven, was clasped in his hand. The angels had been down now to carry him.

"He must have died in a fit," cried Fry.

And Mrs. Dawkes fell across the bed with a low cry of piteous anguish.

CHAPTER XXXV.

ENSHROUDED IN MYSTERY.

Late in the afternoon of as brilliant a day as London can produce, when spring is merging into summer, Thomas Kage, in his professional costume, might have been seen ascending to his chambers in the Temple with the fleet steps of one who runs a race against time. Mr. Kage was then doing little less. He had a vast amount of business on his shoulders just now, legal and private. Only the past night Major Dawkes (as we have already seen) found him late at his chambers, hard at work. This evening he would have to quit London on some private matters connected with his friend Lord Hartledon, and

he would be away for some three or four days. Dashing off his wig and gown, he was about to settle down to his table, and go over certain papers, there waiting for an opinion, when his clerk, Mr. Taylor—for he could afford one now—accosted him.

"One of Major Dawkes's servants has been here, sir to ask if you would go up there as quickly as you could. Mrs. Dawkes——"

"But I can't," interrupted Mr. Kage. "With what I have yet to do to-day, it is not possible. Did you say so?"

"No, sir. I said I would give you the message. I told him you were busy. The little boy is dead!"

"What little boy?"

"Mrs. Dawkes's, sir—little Canterbury."

Thomas Kage's hands ceased rattling the parchments. He looked up as one who believes not.

"What do you mean?"

"He is dead, sir, sure enough, and all that pot of money lapses. He died in the night."

"But what did he die of? What was the matter with him?"

"The man couldn't say. It was that Richards, who has brought notes here once or twice."

"The boy was well again," reiterated Mr. Kage, feeling utterly bewildered. "Dawkes said so when he was here last night; besides, I know it."

"What the man said was, that the nurse found him dead in his bed this morning," pursued Mr. Taylor. "Mrs. Dawkes was in a very terrible state, and her maid sent him to ask you to go up."

A rapid argument in his own mind, whether he might venture to put off his journey until the morrow, and sit up that night to complete his work, was decided in the affirmative. At almost any cost he would go to his cousin in her sore need. He could, by taking the first train in the morning, perform his journey in time.

"I shall want you to stay late to-night, Mr. Taylor."

"Very well, sir."

He went up to Belgravia as fast as a cab could take him, and was shown at once into the presence of Mrs. Dawkes.

Her state was pitiable to witness. Just as she had been when the alarm came, and she had run to the child's room, so she was still—a loose robe on, and her hair hanging down. She had remained since in the very extremity of anguish—now in a semi-fainting state; now rushing to the death-room and calling on her child to live—to live! In short, she was frantic. Could she only have wept—could she only have fallen into a real faint, and so have induced weakness—it had been better for her. Fry said all this to Mr. Kage in a few rapid sentences, as she stood with her hand on the door-handle.

"I can scarcely believe it to be true, Fry, that the child is dead," he whispered.

"And that's like us, sir. We cannot believe it now."

"But what was it?"

"Oh, it must have been a sudden fit, sir. There's nothing else, that I know of, could kill a child in his sleep."

With a cry, something like what may be heard from one in an attack of epilepsy, Mrs. Dawkes sprang forward when she saw Mr. Kage, and flung herself into his arms. The sight of him brought the reaction that had been wanted; and she began to sob frightfully, piteously imploring Thomas Kage to bring *him*—her lamb, her angel-boy, her all—back to life. With difficulty could he unwind her arms; with difficulty attempt a word of consolation. He did not know what to do with her. Fry, hearing the sobs of emotion, came in. Mr. Kage sent her for water and other restoratives. Where was the major, he mentally wondered in deep anger. Surely his proper place was by his wife's side at such an hour as this!

Major Dawkes had gone out to see, as was understood by Fry, about some necessary arrangements.

"I don't care now how soon I die myself, Thomas," exclaimed the poor mother, at the end of a prolonged and exhaustive fit of violent sobbing.

"Hush, Caroline! May God temper the trial to you!" he added, more as a prayer than in answer.

The next to come in, with a whiter face than usual, as if stricken to fear, and words of condolence that seemed genuine enough on her lips, was Keziah Dawkes. Keziah had heard the news by pure accident. Happening to meet one of the

servants in the street, she stopped him to inquire after the health of the house, and learnt what had taken place. Caroline was lying on the sofa then, in another of the semi-fainting-fits, utterly exhausted. Fry, kneeling by her side, strove to put teaspoonfuls of weak brandy-and-water within her lips. Mr. Kage took the opportunity to slip away in search of Judith. He found her in the day-nursery; her hands lying idle on her knees, the tears slowly coursing down her face. She stood up when he entered, and strove to dry her eyes.

"What has the child died of, Judith?"

"Sir, I know no more than the dead—no more than he does, pretty pale lambkin. Fry insists upon it that it must have been a fit; but I don't believe it. He never had a fit in his life; and it stands to reason, that if he'd had one last night I must have heard him. The least noise awakes me. Since his illness he couldn't move in his little bed but I started up. All last night I never heard him stir, never once, and I was awake twice myself. This morning, when I got up, he was still sleeping, as I supposed, and I went on putting things ready for the journey."

"You did not discover it immediately, then?"

"No, sir. I thought I'd let him lie as long as I could, for he had seemed dead asleep last night. I'd hardly laid him down in his bed, before he was off. I might have let him lie longer too, but for Fry's coming up with a message from my mistress, that we was both to be ready without delay. I finished what I was about, and then went to his bedside. 'Master Tom,' says I, 'it's time to get up; and your mamma's astir already, and the morning's beautiful.' But he never answered. 'Wake up, my darling,' says I then, and put the bedclothes down. Sir, you might a'most as well have killed me: there he lay dead!"

"What did the doctor say?"

"The first thing he said after seeing that the child was really dead, was to ask what I'd been giving to him; he asked it sharply too. As if I should give him anything that could hurt!"

She proceeded to recount the few facts connected with the last day of the child's life, Mr. Kage listening. He had eaten his meals well, the last thing he took having been a basin of bread-and-milk for his tea. Judith had seen him take them all

—having, in fact, taken her own meals with him; and not for a minute the previous day had the boy been out of her sight.

"There's the last thing I gave him," she sobbed, pointing to the medicine-bottle on the mantel-piece. "He sat on my lap after he was undressed, and took it as good as gold. I little thought I should never give him anything again."

"What is it?" asked Mr. Kage.

Judith explained. It was a bottle of mixture sent by the doctor, a dessert-spoonful of which the child had been taking three times a-day. Mr. Kage took the bottle in his hand, examined it, and read the label, "The Mixture. Master Canterbury."

"He had took it every drop but that one dose that's left: and a great deal of good it had done him," said Judith, in her deep sorrow, as Mr. Kage returned the bottle to the mantel-piece. "Oh me! there's moments, sir, when I think it can't be nothing but a dream." In truth, it seemed quite like one to Thomas Kage. "Will you see him, sir?"

He nodded assent: and Judith, unlocking the door of the next room, stood aside for him to pass. Many a time and oft had Mr. Kage gone in, to be greeted with the loving words of the gentle child.

At rest now; an angel in the heaven where he had so often wished to be.

"You have been up to see him!" cried Mrs. Dawkes, almost passionately, when Mr. Kage returned to her. "Why did you not tell me? I would have gone with you. I wanted to go."

It seemed that some of the old excitement was coming on again; he laid his restraining hand on hers to enjoin calmness. Keziah Dawkes, sitting at the curtained window with her bonnet-strings untied, looked grey as before. Mrs. Dawkes had not invited her to take her bonnet off. This death would bring no end of good to her beloved brother Barby, but she did not seem to be making a festival of it. Caroline moaned faintly again and again, and let her fingers entwine themselves within those strong ones, in which there seemed to be at least protection.

"What did he die of, Thomas—what did he die of?"

"In truth, I see nothing that he can have died of, except God's visitation," was his honest answer. "No harm seems to have come to him in any shape or form, to account for the death."

"And we were to have gone to the Rock to-day, he and I! By this time we should have been there."

"Try and realize one thing, Caroline—that he is now in perfect happiness; and let it comfort you."

"Comfort! for me!" she rejoined, opening her eyes on him for a moment. "Never again in this life!"

And poor Caroline Dawkes turned her face down upon the sofa-cushion, to moan out the anguish that seemed as if it must kill her then and there.

The dusk of evening had come on before Mr. Kage went down to take his departure. He encountered Major Dawkes in the hall, who was then entering. They turned together into the major's study.

"This is a very strange and sad event," observed Thomas Kage.

"It is the strangest thing that ever happened in this world," returned the major; "and the saddest too—for my wife's sake."

"You can throw no light upon it, I suppose; or conjecture what can have been the cause of death?"

"I! I am the least likely of anybody," spoke the major, with volubility. "I never saw the child but once yesterday, so far as I can remember: and I have been taxing my memory over it. That was in the morning. He went out with Judith, I hear, in the carriage in the afternoon; but I know nothing about it personally. I was shut up in my study the best part of the day, writing letters and going over ac——"

A movement of Mr. Kage's caused the major to stop. Looking quickly behind him, he saw the grey face of his sister. And it certainly wore a scared expression—an expression that she seemed unable to keep under. A hasty greeting—which the major never looked in her face to give—and he went on with what he had been saying.

"I am telling Kage that I never saw the boy but once yesterday, Keziah; never saw him at all, in fact, after the

morning. It is most unfortunate. Not that my seeing him could have shown me what was to happen, or prevented it. As ill-luck had it, too, I did not sleep at home last night."

A slight movement of surprise in Mr. Kage's eyes. No other answer.

"Of course I'd give a good deal not to have been out last night. I've not done it for ages. Things are sure to happen crossly. After leaving your chambers, Kage, I went up to Briscoe's. We sat late at cards, and he gave me a bed. My wife had seemed very poorly when I left her, and I did not care to go home when it got so late, lest she should hear me and be disturbed. I came round betimes this morning, knowing of the day's journey; and before I had been five minutes in the house, the alarm took place. When Judith came in, saying something was the matter with the child, and then called me out to whisper he was dead, I thought she must be saying it for a farce."

Keziah Dawkes drew a long deep breath, as of relief. "Oh, Barnaby, dear! and have you *no* idea of the cause of death?"

"What I think is this. That the child's late illness, or something connected with it, must have been the cause; and that the doctors were mistaken in supposing he had recovered."

"Yes, yes; it must have been so," sighed Keziah.

"Possibly so," admitted Mr. Kage, speaking slowly. "There seems to be no other way of accounting for it. I fear it will have a sad effect on Mrs. Dawkes."

"For a time," said the major, showing a long face. "But she'll get over it after a bit; she'll get over it. Other mothers do."

A coroner's inquest would have to be held on the child: very much to the resentment of Major and Mrs. Dawkes. More to that of the former, however, than of the latter. But for his enlarging in his wife's presence on the degradation of Tom's being "inquested," as though he were a common pauper's child, she would never have thought of it, one way or the other. Major Dawkes's resentment, however, could not arrest the law's demands; and an inquest was fixed for the Thursday afternoon, the child having been found dead on the Wednesday. Early on Thursday morning the doctors made

the post-mortem examination; and they came to the astounding conclusion that the child had died from some narcotic poison —say opium. An overdose of opium.

The first frantic violence of Mrs. Dawkes's grief had spent itself, and on this morning, Thursday, she was tolerably calm—calm, save for a restless nervousness that prevented her from being still. Her medical attendants recommended her to remain in bed; but Mrs. Dawkes paid no heed to them, and by ten o'clock she was up, and in her dressing-room, which was, in fact, a sort of boudoir. Here she sat, the breakfast-tray before her, making believe to sip her tea, and to eat small morsels of the thin toast. Major Dawkes had breakfasted below as usual, and was just now closeted in the dining-room with the two doctors who had been making the examination. On coming from the room above, they had requested to see him, and were shown in to him in the dining-room. Major Dawkes was not holding the doctors in much favour just now, for they were at the root of this, to him, offensive proceeding, the calling of the inquest. In the absence of all certainty as to the cause of death, they had declined to give the requisite certificate.

Never for a moment, except during the intervals when she slept the sleep of exhaustion, was her child's image absent from Mrs. Dawkes's mental sight, or its memory from her heart. It seemed to her that Heaven had been bitterly unkind; and the more she told herself it was wrong to think so, the more she thought it. "Only two days ago, and he was with me in this very room," she moaned; "prattling to me while I ate my breakfast. I divided a bit of my toast between us, him and me. Judith, standing by, said hot buttered toast was not good for him. Oh, my boy, my boy!"

Fry came in with an expression of face that attracted even the attention of her desolate mistress. It was a mixture of intense surprise, of puzzled curiosity, and of mortification.

"What is the matter?" asked Mrs. Dawkes.

The matter was this. The doctors, having to ask two or three questions bearing on the conclusion they had come to regarding the death of the child, had chosen to put them to Fry, knowing she was in a degree a confidential servant, and

had caused her to be called in. There Fry learnt—but she was the only one of the household to whom it was suffered to transpire—that the death was the result of opium. The declaration displeased Fry beyond everything: she had formed her opinion that the child had died in a fit, and would not part with it easily.

"It's a nice thing they are saying now, ma'am," replied Fry, in answer to her mistress, closing the door softly, and speaking in covert tones. "It wouldn't be doctors if they didn't have some crotchet to invent. What he died of, sweet child, was a fit, and nothing else."

Mrs. Dawkes paused in some surprise. "Why, what do they say it was, then?"

"They say he was poisoned, ma'am. Leastways that he took something that was as good as poison; senseless idiots!"

"They—say—he—was—poisoned!" echoed Mrs. Dawkes, leaning forward in her chair, with dilating eyes. "Take care what you assert, Fry."

"I think it's them should be told to take care of that, ma'am," was Fry's rather resentful answer. "They declare he must have died from taking an overdose of opium; which amounts to pretty nigh the same thing as saying he was poisoned. I'd like to ask them who was likely to give him opium. There was not such a thing as a drop in the house; but doctors must have their say. It was a fit."

A faint noise, curious in its sound, caused Fry to turn sharply. She had been putting the breakfast-things together whilst she talked. Was her mistress going to have a fit? She looked like it.

"Opium! He died from opium! Do they say *that?*"

"They do, ma'am. They are telling the major of it now in the dining-room; but I don't believe it's true."

With a face white as ashes—with hands lifted up before her as if to ward off some dreadful blow—with a strange terror pervading her whole aspect, stood Mrs. Dawkes. "But—but——"

Not another syllable. Utterance failed; and she fell back on the seat in a dead faint.

"And enough to make her, poor dear, when such atrocious

things can be said of her own child!" ejaculated the sympathizing Fry, flying to the rescue.

When the coroner's inquest met in the afternoon, the medical men declared their opinion—that the child had died from the effect of some poison, probably opium. Judith, as nurse, was very sharply questioned—turned inside out, as may be said—as to what food the child had taken on the evening of the day preceding his death. She was to the full as indignant as Fry—more so, indeed, at their supposing anything of the kind could have found its way to him by any chance whatever; but Judith, unlike Fry, was not loud. Swallowing down her tears and striving for calmness, she was very quiet and respectful, only insisting upon it that the doctors must be wrong. Neither bit nor drop had approached the child's lips but what she herself had given him—saving a small bit of his mamma's buttered toast in the morning, which both she and her mistress had watched him eat.

"He never was out of my sight during the whole day for one minute, gentlemen," she earnestly reiterated to the jury; "and I can take my oath that he had nothing but his ordinary and proper food. The doctors say that what he took to harm him must have been taken at night; but after his tea at five o'clock, which was bread-and-milk, he had nothing whatever—except the dessert-spoonful of physic when he was undressed; and the doctors know that that couldn't have hurt him, for it was their own physic, sent in by themselves, and he had been taking it for two or three days."

Judith's simplicity and earnest manner made its own favourable impression on the coroner's court. Major Dawkes, who was present, testified that she was a truthful, faithful servant, valued by her mistress, and fond almost to idolatry of the child. The medicine-bottle, remaining in its place on the mantel-piece with the one dose left in it, had been examined at once by the medical men, and found to be exactly as they had sent it in—right and proper and harmless medicine. In fact, so far as reliable testimony went, nothing could be more clearly proved than that the child had taken nothing improper; and, moreover, that there had positively occurred no opportunity whatever for anything else to be administered to him.

No one could have had access to him. When the child was in bed—and the nurse testified that he fell asleep almost as she laid his head on the pillow—she, Judith, had remained in the room. Closing the door between the two nurseries, she had set to work to turn out her drawers and pack up her own things, which were all in the bedroom. The child never stirred, she said; he was sleeping sound and fast. Of course, it was now known that he was in the sleep of stupor, passing quietly on to death. At ten o'clock—she heard the hour strike from the churches—she ran downstairs for her supper—merely some bread-and-butter. Bringing it up on a plate, she went on arranging her things, and went to bed between eleven and twelve.

A juryman interrupted to inquire how long she remained downstairs, and whether any one meanwhile could have had access to the child.

"I was not down two minutes, sir," was Judith's answer; "and no one could have had access to the child. Only my mistress was upstairs—she was in bed in her own room; and the major was not at home. It happened that I saw every one of the servants downstairs, except Richards; and I've heard since that he had gone out on business for his master."

Major Dawkes nodded a corroboration of this. Before going out himself that evening, he had given his servant Richards a commission to execute out-of-doors.

"No one can regret more than myself that I should have been absent on this particular evening and night," added the major, with some natural emotion. "It was getting on for nine o'clock when I left home. I had business with Mr. Kage, the barrister, and went down to his chambers in the Temple. I slept at Captain Briscoe's, and got home between seven and eight in the morning."

"So that, personally, you know nothing of the sad event, Major Dawkes?" spoke the coroner, with civility.

"Nothing whatever, I am sorry to say. I consider my absence most unfortunate. Not that, had I been at home, I could have done any good, or prevented the death. The chances are—nay, I may say the certainty—that I should not have known of it one moment earlier than I did; but I nevertheless regret that it should have fallen out so."

"Did the child appear to you to be as well and lively as usual that day, Major Dawkes?"

"Quite so; what little I saw of him. I did not see him at all after the morning. Once or twice, in passing to my bedroom, I heard him chattering to his nurse, the two shut up in the nursery; but I did not see him myself during the latter part of the day."

"Can you at all account for this fact—that he must have taken opium?"

"So little can I account for it, that when the medical men informed me it was the case, I could not, and did not, believe them. Even now I am loth to admit it; for it seems to me absolutely impossible that the child could have been brought into contact with any opium, or taken it. His nurse, as you have heard, says she never quitted him at all; and I believe it to have been so. She is a perfectly reliable woman."

The coroner and jury were evidently at a nonplus. Judith was recalled, and told to re-state minutely the events of the evening from and after the boy's tea-time. Particularly was she pressed upon the point, whether she was positive she did not lose sight of him *at all* before he was in bed; one of the jury remarking that children were apt to taste anything they came near, if not watched; *his* were.

"We had tea together in the nursery, gentlemen—him and me," said Judith, in obedience. "Both of us had bread-and-milk: it's what I'm fond of, having been brought up in the country, where milk's a plenty. Little Tom read to me after tea—it was what he liked doing—first a fairy-tale, and next a Bible story. Soon after seven, his mamma's bell rang for him to go down to her. I took him; and my mistress began talking to me about the morrow's journey. We stayed there ten minutes maybe, or a quarter-of-an-hour. I went back with him then, and soon undressed him——"

"Was he as lively as usual?" came the interruption.

"Yes, that he was, sir—talking about the Rock—and didn't want to go to bed. But when I told him how tired he'd be on the morrow, and what a long way it was, he said no more. He was the most tractable child a body could have to do with—as good as gold. He said his prayers at my knee; and I

gave him a spoonful of physic; and then he got drowsy, and I put him into bed. Nobody came near him, gentlemen; and there was not the smallest chance that anybody could come. After he was in bed, I shut myself into his room, and began putting the things together, as I've already said."

"Did any of the servants come up during this time?" asked a juryman.

"I don't know, sir. They might have come into the day-nursery without my hearing them. I don't think they did; for I noticed nothing touched in the room when I got back to it."

"Were the servants in the habit of coming up?" resumed the same juryman.

"Sometimes they'd come and talk a bit. None of them came that evening, sir, that I know of."

"If all the servants came to the nursery after the boy was out of it, it could make no difference to the question at issue," interposed the coroner, impatiently. "So far as the testimony goes—and it seems to me that we may rely upon it—neither person nor thing could have approached the boy to harm him."

"I am certain that it didn't," answered Judith, hot tears gathering in her eyes.

There appeared to be no further evidence to sift—nothing more to be learnt. The case was wrapt in a shroud of impenetrable mystery; and after some discussion, the coroner and jury were fain to give it up as a bad job, and return their verdict:

"Died from opium; but how administered there is no evidence to show."

And little Tom Canterbury's body was buried in Brompton Cemetery, his soul having departed with the angels. And Major Dawkes was a free man again, and a wealthy one.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE POSTERN-DOOR.

The wild wind was whistling and booming round the station at Chilling as the train came rushing along in the dusk of a fine evening, when autumn was merging itself into winter. Time, working its changes and changes, had extended still farther the branch of the Aberton railway; and Chilling itself had a station now. It was not much more than a bleak little shed and a telegraph-box: but Chilling was proud of it, and at least three trains a-day stopped there. It brought freight this time. Out of one first-class compartment stepped Thomas Kage, out of another Mrs. Dunn—Lydia Canterbury in the days gone by; neither of whom had known that the other was in the train. It sometimes happens so. Both of them had come down unexpectedly—that is, unknown to their friends in Chilling. A solitary fly was waiting outside. Mrs. Dunn made for it in haste, lest any one else should appropriate it first, and was calling out to the porter to bring her luggage, when Thomas Kage went up to her.

"Goodness me!" cried she, in her off-hand manner, "what brings you here?"

"I have come down on a little business," he answered. "I did not know you were in the train."

"I'm sure *I* did not know you were. I wish I had known it. Would you like a seat in the fly? I am going to surprise them at Thornhedge Villa; they don't know of my coming."

"No, thank you. I shall see you soon."

The fly, laden with its luggage, was rattled off. Mrs. Dunn ordered it to stop at Chilling Rectory; it lay in the line of route to Thornhedge Villa; and indeed, in her usual free-and-easy independence, she had not quite made up her mind which dwelling to honour first with a visit. Thomas Kage thought she must have come to surprise some of them with a tolerably long sojourn, as he looked after the pile of boxes on the roof of

the fly. Turning away, he found himself greeted by a respectable, portly man, wearing the black clothes and white necktie of an upper servant. Mr. Kage knew the face, but could not remember where he had seen it.

"Neel, sir; butler at the Rock."

"To be sure," said Mr. Kage. "I remember Mrs. Dawkes told me you remained at the Rock."

"Yes, sir. They wanted a responsible person to take charge at the Rock during their long absences from it, what with the valuable paintings and furniture, so I have stayed; and the major took on a London butler up there, who robbed them frightfully, we hear."

"Is Mrs. Dawkes staying at the Rock now?"

"She is, sir. She has never been away from it since she came down when the poor little heir died in the summer. I think she is very ill, sir."

"I will see her to-morrow," said Mr. Kage.

He walked away with Neel's last words ringing in his ears, carrying his small travelling-bag in his hand—for he had the same propensity to wait on himself as of yore, when practicable. He had not seen Mrs. Dawkes since the day of the child's funeral, for she had left London immediately. Twice he had written to her at the Rock, friendly notes of inquiry as to her health and welfare; but Mrs. Dawkes had not answered either. When he met the major in town, as would happen sometimes by chance, he was told Mrs. Dawkes was pretty well, and enjoying the country.

During the long vacation, a matter of pressing business connected with Lord Hartledon had taken Mr. Kage first to Switzerland and then to Scotland. He returned to London in October, was up to his eyes in business for a fortnight, and had now travelled down to Chilling for a specific purpose—to ask Millicent Canterbury to be his wife. Turning into the modest inn, the Canterbury Arms, he washed some of the dust off him, changed his coat, bespoke a bed, and then went forth again; for he wished to put the question at rest without delay. Taking the nearest way to Thornhedge Villa—the Miss Canterburys' residence since their father's ill-omened second marriage—he was entering the garden, when a young lady,

coming up with fleet footsteps from the opposite direction, nearly ran against him.

"Millicent!"

She gave a little scream of surprise, and started in the dusk from the extended hand. But it was truly and veritably Thomas Kage—his voice, his hand, himself—and Miss Millicent timidly begged his pardon, and blushed like a schoolgirl.

"It has so surprised me. There's scarcely any one in the world I should have less thought of seeing than you. I have been to the schools," Millicent added rapidly, as if wishing to cover some agitation that she was very conscious her manner betrayed. "My sister Jane is not strong, and I take the trouble of the schools from her."

"I think there is another surprise in store for you. What would you say if I told you your sister is here?"

"Mrs. Rufort?" asked Millicent, looking towards the windows of the house.

"Mrs. Dunn."

"Impossible!"

"Quite possible, and quite true," said Thomas Kage.

"But she is in Germany. We are beginning to think she intends to take up her abode there for good."

"*I* think she must be intending to take it up here for good. I judge by the trunks that have come with her."

Millicent laughed. He explained about the meeting as they walked along. In point of fact, Mrs. Dunn, obeying one of her many sudden whims, had taken it into her head to quit Germany, and come down to see her relatives. To write and inform them she had looked upon as quite superfluous. Millicent's pulses were beating. Hers had in truth been a lasting love, enduring through many years and no encouragement. No encouragement, at least, that she could take courage from, though now and again stray tones and looks, in their rare meetings, might have whispered hope to her heart.

"You have not seen Mrs. Dawkes lately?" observed Millicent.

"Not since her child died. What a blow that was!"

"A worse one for her than we can even imagine, I fear,"

said Millicent. "She looks fearfully ill; but we very rarely meet. You have come down, I suppose, to see her?"

"Not so. I came down, Millicent, to see you."

A hot blush in her face, a startled look, visible even in the dim twilight. Mr. Kage touched her arm, and drew her down a side-path they were passing.

"Let us walk here for a few minutes, Millicent."

Seated by her dressing-room fire, with little prevision of the surprises in store for her, was Olive Canterbury. The door opened softly, and Millicent came in.

"Olive, will you go into the drawing-room?" she said. "Some one is there."

"Who is it, Leta?" asked Miss Canterbury, wondering what could have sent the young lady's face into its scarlet glow.

"Thomas Kage. He came down by train. He wants to see you."

Down sat Millicent as she spoke: *she* was not wanted in the drawing-room. Olive Canterbury took notice of the signs—of the faltering tones and the downcast eyes—drew her conclusions, and passed out of the room with a stately step. As to Mrs. Dunn, she had gone out of Leta's mind altogether.

"Your visit is unexpected, but I am very glad to see you," said Olive, shaking Mr. Kage's hand heartily, for he was a great favourite of hers.

"My visit is to Millicent," he answered, plunging at once into the matter that had brought him down. "I have come to ask her to be my wife. I should have asked it long ago, but that briefs did not come in so quickly as I wished. They have taken a turn for the better of late."

"And what does Millicent say?"

"Millicent ran away and said nothing," he answered, with a smile; "nothing very decisive, at any rate. So I called out that I had better see you."

"A good sign," laughed Miss Canterbury. "I fancy you and Leta have understood each other for some time," she added. "I know I used to think so when we were in London."

"Tacitly, I believe we have; and I hope Millicent has understood why it was only tacitly. I was too poor to speak."

"Millicent's fortune would have helped you on, Mr. Kage."

"It is that fortune which has kept me from her," he replied.

"It need not. It is only ten thousand pounds."

Thomas Kage raised his eyes, bright with amusement, to Miss Canterbury's face. "*Only* ten thousand! A very paltry sum, no doubt, to the Miss Canterburys, reared to their hundreds of thousands, but a Golconda to a struggling barrister."

"*Reared* to their hundreds of thousands; yes!" retorted Miss Canterbury, with a swelling heart, "but not enjoying them."

Sitting down, he went briefly over his position with her, showing her what his present income was; saying how much the bequest of the two houses from Mrs. Garston had helped him on. He should scarcely think himself justified yet in removing to the larger of the two, according to the wish expressed by his kind old friend, he said; but Millicent should decide the point herself. Both of them evidently took her consent to the marriage for granted. Miss Canterbury asked him to stay and partake of dinner, without ceremony. But ere that meal could be announced, even now as they were talking together, up dashed Mrs. Dunn's fly, with part of the luggage, taking the house by storm. The other part had been left at the Rectory, for she meant to divide her time between them, she told Olive. Olive was delighted to see her; it seemed an age since they met.

Not a greater contrast than of yore did the three sisters present, sitting down to dinner together. Olive, lofty in mind, lofty in manner, tall, handsome, always self-possessed; Lydia Dunn, stout, restless, an inveterate talker; Millicent, much younger than either, quiet and graceful. But Millicent would never see twenty-seven again. Time passes swiftly: year follows year, each with a more rapid wing than its precursor. Miss Canterbury took as usual the head of her table, requesting Thomas Kage to face her.

"Now then, Mr. Kage, I am going to cross-question you," impatiently began Mrs. Dunn, the instant the servants had left them alone after dinner. "Who gave the poison to that child, little Tom Canterbury?"

"That is a problem I cannot solve," was his reply.

"You were on the spot at the time."

"I was in London."

"And I abroad," pursued Mrs. Dunn, in a tone of much resentment. "It was a dreadful occurrence; and all the information I could gain of it was by letters or hearsay. Do you tell me the particulars. I had a great mind to come over and ascertain them for myself; but it would have answered no end. Begin at the beginning, please. Had he been ill?"

"He had been dangerously ill with inflammation of the chest, but was getting better; in fact, was nearly well," said Mr. Kage, obeying her implicitly, and recalling the facts. "Mrs. Dawkes was about to take him to the Rock for change of air. That same morning, the one they ought to have started, he was found dead in his bed."

"And had died from a dose of opium. But now, who gave it him?"

"The facts were shrouded in mystery," continued Mr. Kage, "and the coroner's jury returned an open verdict. The nurse was perfectly trustworthy, and the child had not been out of her sight the whole of the previous day. She undressed him, gave him his regular medicine, and put him into his bed by the side of her own. She heard nothing of him in the night; and in the morning, when she came to take him up, he was dead."

"What was that medicine?" suspiciously asked Mrs. Dunn.

"Harmless, proper medicine, as was proved at the inquest. He had been taking a dessert-spoonful of it three times a day."

"Some one must have got into the bedroom and administered the poison; that's clear," said Mrs. Dunn. "The nurse Judith was trustworthy; I'll give her that due. She was one of the housemaids at the Rock before we left it, or my father had made a simpleton of himself by marrying that flighty child, Caroline Kage. When the changes came, and the new baby was born, Judith became its nurse. Yes, she was to be trusted. But some one must have got into the chamber whilst she slept."

"No one went in; that seems to have been certain," observed Mr. Kage.

"Oh, ay, I know it was so asserted," contemptuously returned Mrs. Dunn; "but the boy could not have found a bottle of

laudanum in his bed, uncorked ready for use, and swallowed it down. It does not stand to reason, Mr. Kage."

"Judith deposed that she never left the room for more than a couple of minutes after the boy was in bed, and then no one could have got to him. She put up some things that would be wanted for the journey in the morning, and then went to bed herself, the doors being locked; and they were so locked when she rose in the morning. No person could have entered."

"Well, all I know is, that poison cannot be taken by a child in this way without its having been given to it; and you are the first person that ever I heard say it could, Mr. Kage."

He glanced at the angry lady with a spice of merriment; but for the grave subject, he might have laughed outright. "Did I say it could, Mrs. Dunn?"

"Just as good, when you assert that no one was near him but Judith."

"Judith never left him; that appears to be a fact," interposed Miss Canterbury, speaking for the first time. "The medical men thought the poison had been taken about evening time, did they not, Mr. Kage?"

Thomas Kage nodded.

"Now, Olive, pray let me speak," broke in her impatient sister. "You were in the way of hearing about it at the time, remember. Mr. Kage, I want to know what your opinion is—how *did* he come by the poison? Do you suspect *any* one of having given it to him? Answer me frankly amidst ourselves."

"Frankly speaking, Mrs. Dunn, I cannot answer you. As to suspecting any one—No. The child seems to have been so encompassed by protection, that I do not see how it was possible for harm, whether in the shape of mankind or womankind, to approach him. The matter to me appears to be one of those mysteries that cannot be accounted for."

"Then you positively know nothing more to tell me!" cried the exasperated Mrs. Dunn.

"I really do not."

"Well, I'm sure I never heard of anything so unsatisfactory! Where's Judith now?"

"Judith took another situation afterwards," said Miss Canterbury. "Somewhere in Essex, I think."

"Mrs. Dawkes has been a fine gainer. The death gave her all the splendid Canterbury fortune."

"Hush, Lydia!" interrupted Olive. "However much we may have felt disposed to cast previous reflections on Mrs. Dawkes, we can but have the sincerest sympathy for her in her great misfortune. I believe she idolized the child."

"She was very fond of him," said Mr. Kage, "and her grief was pitiable to witness. She clung round me, and asked if I could not bring him back to life. Fry sent for me in the afternoon, and I found Caroline almost beside herself. Major Dawkes had gone out, about some of the necessary arrangements, they said, and she was alone. She clung to me, as I tell you, in a sad state; I hardly knew what to do with her."

"She came down to the Rock, a mere skeleton, the day after the funeral," remarked Miss Canterbury. "We were shocked when we called upon her. She briefly and shrinkingly told us the particulars, tallying with what you have now related, and said she should never recover the blow during life. I thought, as she spoke, that she little knew how time heals the worst pangs; but I fear my thoughts were too fast, for she does not recover either strength or spirits. We scarcely ever see her; there seems to be an unwillingness on her part to receive visitors, and she leads a very secluded life. I do not think it can be good for her."

"The major passes most of his time in London," abruptly remarked Thomas Kage.

"He passes it somewhere," replied Miss Canterbury; "he is rarely at the Rock."

"At any rate, *he* has gained by the bargain," cried the incorrigible Mrs. Dunn. "It is a magnificent fortune for him to have dropped into unexpectedly, through the demise of a little stepson."

"It is his wife who has dropped into it, not he," remarked Miss Canterbury.

"As if he did not have the fingering of it!" retorted Mrs. Dunn. And Thomas Kage drew in his lips, compressing them to silence. Fingering, ay! "Keziah Dawkes, that sister of

his, lives with her, I hear," said Mrs. Dunn. "Austin Rufort told me. A nice wet blanket she must be, judging by her face, to live with an invalid!"

"A cold, grey, hard-looking woman," acquiesced Olive Canterbury. "Caroline comes out very rarely; when she does, it is only to walk or drive to her mother's cottage and home again; and Miss Dawkes is always with her like her shadow. Poor Caroline seems as though she could never more find comfort in life; it is a sadness painful to look upon."

"Oh, my goodness! And what satisfaction has the fortune brought her, that she so schemed for?" cried Lydia Dunn. "Only a few short years, and to have it believed that there's no more comfort for her in life! And her mother—the worse plotter of the two—a nice miserable object she is, by all account! Austin Rufort came in from seeing her this afternoon while I was there. We are better off than they are, with all their wealth. As to that Dawkes, Mrs. Garston knew what she was about when she left her fortune away from him. *She* was an insolent old woman to the last, though. Fancy a Bible and Prayer-book the legacy to me, and to Olive a case of diamonds! I'm sick of the world at times. Let us go to the drawing-room, if no one wants to take anything more."

In her unceremonious fashion, she rose at once and went away. When Mr. Kage followed them, he found Millicent alone near the fire; her sisters were at the far end of the room, examining some presents brought by Mrs. Dunn from Germany.

"Millicent, I have had no direct answer, remember," he said in a low tone. "But I am easy on that score; for I know the signs of rejection well, and you do not wear them."

"Have you been rejected, that you know them well?"

"Once—years ago."

"By Caroline Kage?" she whispered.

"Even so. I thought you must have known it at the time. I loved her, Millicent; how deeply, matters little now, and has not mattered since that time. She broke the spell too rudely."

"When she left you to marry my father—or rather, his fortune; for that was what in truth she married. But she did love you, Thomas: I saw it then; and she continued to love you, or I am mistaken, after papa's death."

He knew she had. But he was strictly honourable; and that love and its acknowledgment would be buried within the archives of his own breast for ever.

"I shall not make you the less fond husband, Millicent, for having indulged a dream in the days gone by."

She felt that to be true. But there's a dash of coquetry in all women, and will be to the end of time. Millicent affected to doubt. "If Major Dawkes were to die to-morrow, leaving Caroline free, you might wish then you had not spoken to me."

Mr. Kage looked at her. "That contingency has arisen once—when your father died."

No answer.

"Millicent, seeing as I see now, loving one of you as I do now, and not the other, were you and Caroline standing before me for my choice, and she had never been else than free, never a wife, it is you I should take. Time has worked its changes within me, as well as in life's events. My darling, you need not doubt me!"

Her hand was sheltered in his; a sweet smile parted her lips; and on her cheek, partly turned from him, shone a bright rose-colour.

It was rather cruel abruptly to interrupt the interview; and perhaps Olive Canterbury herself thought so, but she had no other resource. A servant had come in, bringing a note for Mr. Kage, marked "Immediate." He wondered who could be writing to him there and then; but when he looked at the superscription, he saw it was from Mrs. Dawkes.

"Open your note, Mr. Kage; don't stand on ceremony."

He was opening it as Mrs. Dunn spoke. She watched him, feeling curious. It contained a request, than which none more earnest had ever been penned, that he would go at once to the Rock, would return with the messenger, and *not* speak of it to any one. "Who has brought this?" he asked of the servant.

"It's Fry, sir, Mrs. Dawkes's maid. She is waiting at the door; she wouldn't come in."

With a word of apology to Miss Canterbury for his departure, but none of explanation, Mr. Kage withdrew. Outside he found Fry. She said that Mrs. Dawkes wanted to see him for something very particular indeed, if he would be so kind as

go back to the Rock with her. Mr. Kage acquiesced, and they proceeded on the way together.

"I hear your mistress is not in a good state of health," he observed.

"She's just in that state, sir, that unless a change takes place more speedier than it's possible, she will not last long," was the maid's answer.

He was deeply shocked, but he made no comment; though he could not but think there was something unreasonable in her thus grieving to death for the loss of a fragile child. "Is the major at the Rock just now?" he inquired.

"No, sir. His sister is with us; she came down here the day following the one me and my mistress came, and she has never gone away since. As to the major, it's not often he troubles the Rock."

"But with his wife in this precarious state?" debated Thomas Kage.

"Oh, as to that, my poor mistress would as lieve have his room as his company. They are not too good friends, sir."

Fry gave her head a toss in the starlight. It seemed evident that she was not too good a friend of the major's either. Mr. Kage said nothing.

"My mistress has been wanting to see you so much, sir, that she was talking of sending to London for you," resumed Fry. "When I told her to-night that you were at Chilling, she said it was nothing but a Providence that had brought you down."

"How did you know I was here?"

"Neel brought me word, sir. He went to the station after a parcel of books Miss Dawkes expected, and saw you there. I went round to the inn first, and they said they thought you had gone to Miss Canterbury's."

"Is it grieving for the child that has brought your mistress into this sad state of health?"

"It can't be anything else, sir. She has never looked up, so to say, since he was put into his grave. Not that she ever speaks of it, even to me. I have ventured once or twice to say that she ought not to let it prey upon her mind so, as the dear little boy is better off; but she answers nothing—only tells me to hold my tongue."

"She wants cheerful society, and change."

"Just what I say, sir," returned Fry. "Always alone, and brooding upon it, it stands to reason that she can't shake it off. I'm sure the way she tosses and turns and moans in her sleep is enough to make her ill, let alone anything else. I sleep in her room now, sir. The day the inquest took place in London, she says to me, 'Fry, get a bed put up in my room to-night; I am ill, and may want attendance in the night.' Since that she has never let me go out of her room again. If she moves her room—and she has twice since she came to the Rock—my bed has to be moved too."

"Is Miss Dawkes a sufficiently cheerful companion for your mistress?" asked Mr. Kage, a doubtful accent in his voice.

"Well, sir, I believe she does her best to amuse her. But my mistress sits a great deal alone in her own rooms, where she won't always admit Miss Dawkes. She never liked her, and that's the fact."

Walking quickly, they had approached the Rock, and were close to the front entrance. Fry took a sudden detour to the right.

"This way, if you please, sir," she whispered.

"This way!" echoed Mr. Kage; for the way led direct into the wilderness of trees that bordered the south wing of the Rock. "Wherefore?"

"It's all right, sir."

Glancing back to the house, he saw how dull it looked; scarcely any lights to be seen in its windows; just like the dwelling of one who lives an invalid life, secluded from the world. Fry plunged into a labyrinth of trees, and Mr. Kage followed her.

"My mistress does not wish your visit to her known, sir, and I am going to take you in by the small iron postern-door in the south wing," said Fry, in a confidential tone. "A rare trouble I had to unlock it to-night, for it has never been used—no, nor opened either—since the time of young Mr. Edgar Canterbury. I thought I should have had to call Neel, but my mistress said to do it myself, if I could. You've heard of the door, sir, I dare say; it opens on a staircase which leads right up to the rooms in the south wing: and Mr. Edgar used to steal in and out that

way, when his father wanted to keep too tight a hand upon him. My mistress has changed her apartments for these. I didn't want her to. Edgar Canterbury died in them, and I thought it looked like a bad omen; but Miss Dawkes said she was to go into them if she liked, and not be checked in such a trifle. But for her being in them, I'm sure I don't know however you would have got to her to-night, sir, unbeknown."

"To whom does Mrs. Dawkes not wish my visit known?" he asked. "To the servants?"

"Chiefly to Miss Dawkes, sir. But there's none of *them* she'd trust, except me and Neel; they are all regular gossips. Mind your face, sir."

It all sounded mysterious enough, especially Fry's voice. The shrubs were dense just here, and the recommendation as to his face was connected with the spreading brambles, the door—a small iron door—being completely hidden by them. Fry dexterously fought her way to it, took a key from her pocket, and turned it in the lock. After a great deal of creaking and groaning, the door allowed itself to be pushed open. Mr. Kage saw a flight of narrow stairs, on one of which stood a lighted hand-lamp.

"You must excuse the dust, sir. It's an inch thick."

Locking the door behind her, she took the lamp to light him up. At the top of the stairs another door had to be opened, and a dark closet passed through. This brought them to the habitable part of the south wing. Crossing the richly-carpeted corridor, Thomas Kage found himself in the presence of Mrs. Dawkes.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

IN THE SOUTH WING.

Shocked though Mr. Kage had been by Fry's account of her mistress's state, far, far more shocked was he to see her. The room was small, but handsome, and replete with every comfort. Mrs. Dawkes sat on a sofa near the fire; her features were white

and attenuated, her cheeks and lips scarlet with inward fever, and a dark circle surrounded her wild bright eyes. The black-silk dress she wore sat loosely upon her; her beautiful golden hair, bound back by a bit of black ribbon, fell carelessly on her shoulders. She did not rise from the sofa, but held out both her hands to Thomas Kage. He advanced and took them in silence.

"Fry," said Mrs. Dawkes, bending aside to look beyond him, "remain in the room next the baize door. If she comes to the door, call out to her that I am not visible to-night; but don't unlock it to answer her. I am too unwell to go down, say, and can see no one here."

"All right, ma'am," answered Fry, as she went out and closed the door.

Thomas Kage still retained her hands, looking the pity he would not express. He thought her culpably wrong to give way to this intense grief, but supposed it had become morbid. She gazed up into his face with a yearning look.

"Years ago, in this very house," she began, "you said that you would henceforth from that time be unto me as a brother, other relationship between us being barred. You said that if ever I were in need of a true friend, I was to apply to you. I have put aside the old feelings—I have indeed; but I want a friend. Will you be one?"

"You know I will, Caroline. Your best and truest friend: your brother."

He relinquished her hands, and sat down by her.

"I have had a door put up—you might have seen it had you looked to the other end of the corridor—a strong green-baize door that fastens inside. I made the excuse that the apartments in this wing were cold, and I would have them shut in from the draught."

It was not so much the words that struck upon Thomas Kage as being unpleasantly singular; it was the manner, the tone in which they were uttered. She spoke in a hushed whisper, and turned her eyes to different parts of the room, as if in dread of being watched from the walls.

"I think I dreamt of this evening—of your coming here," she continued. "I am sure it has been presented indistinctly

to my mind. And I knew that I could not talk to you undisturbed, so I had the door put up for that, as well as to keep her out—and him, when he is down here."

"You—dreamt of this evening?" asked Thomas Kage, not catching distinctly the meaning of the words.

"I seem to have foreseen it. I knew that I should need to see you before I die—for who else is there that I can trust?—and I knew that so long as she could get access to me there was no chance of any private conversation. Besides, I wanted to be alone; all to myself; away from the weariness of her continual presence, from her observant eyes. She's a spy upon me. She is a spy."

A strange fear came over Thomas Kage as he listened. Had she in any degree lost her mind? Something in the words and the disconnected tone suggested the thought to him. But he was wrong. Highly feverish she was; her mind restless, her manner nervous; but nothing more.

"I know she is placed over me as a spy. I can see it, and so can Fry; but I am now in that state of nervous weakness that any great scene of agitation might kill me, so I do not exert my authority to turn her out. But I am the Rock's mistress, and I will be as long as I live; and I sent for the man, and gave my orders, and had the door put up."

"You speak of Miss Dawkes?"

"Yes. She watches me like a cat by night and by day. What do you think? She actually proposed to take Fry's place in my room at night. It was the first time *he* was down after we came here. That did arouse me. I told him that if his sister pushed herself too much on me—and he knew I had never cared for her—I should apply for a separation from him, and be rid of both of them. I can't think how I ever took courage to say it; but Mr. Carlton had called that day, and Miss Canterbury had called, and it seemed to make me think I was not quite without friends, and that I need not be so much afraid. We have moments of inspiration, you know. It answered, too; for nothing more was said about her sleeping in my room. And then the time went on, and I moved into this wing, and had the door put up. She does not know of the postern staircase."

"Caroline, you are feverish; your imagination is excited," he soothingly said. "Can I get you anything to calm you, my dear?"

"I am no more feverish than usual. And as to excitement —let any one lose a child in the way I did, and see if imagination would ever calm down again."

"But you do very wrong to indulge this excessive grief. I must point out your errors, Caroline: you know I have always spoken for your good, your welfare."

"Oh yes, I know you have," she interrupted, in a tone of anguished remorse. "If I had only heeded you! You told me such a will ought not to be made; you told me the money would not bring me good. If I had only heeded you! You told me Captain Dawkes was not a fit husband for me. Thomas, I accepted him in a fit of angry passion; of pique against you."

"These events are past; why recall them?"

"Why *not* recall them? I am passing from the world, and I would not that you should think I go blindfold to the grave: though I may have lived blindfold, or partially so. When you quitted the Rock, after that decisive interview had taken place between us, which I am sure you remember as vividly as I, I seemed not to care what became of me. I was bitterly angry with you; and when the man proposed again to me, I believe I accepted him only because you had warned me not to do it, and I hoped it would vex you. God has punished me."

"It cannot be recalled, Caroline; surely you may let it rest," he rejoined. "I ask you why you give way to this unaccountable sorrow. It is a positive sin to talk of grief sending you into the grave. Your child is better off. He is at rest; he is in happiness."

"I am not grieving for him. I have learnt to be glad that he went before me."

"Then what is all this? You are seriously ill in mind as well as in body. What distress is it that you are suffering from?"

"I must have inherited a touch of papa's complaint; he died of consumption, I believe. Before Tom went, I was very

ill and weak, as you may remember; and—and—the shock, I suppose, prevented my rallying. In short, it is that which has killed me."

"The grief?"

"No, not the grief."

"The shock, then?"

"No, not the shock. It's the wretchedness altogether. Then things are preying upon me; things which I cannot speak of; and whenever *he* is at the Rock, I am in a dreadful state of nervousness. And no one knows how *her* being here angers me and worries me."

Mrs. Dawkes's words were by no means intelligible to their hearer. He could not help remarking, either, the strange avoidance of her husband's and Miss Dawkes's names.

"I do not comprehend the half of what you say, Caroline. What things are they that prey upon you?"

Mrs. Dawkes shuddered. "I tell you I cannot speak of them. Thomas, will you serve me?"

"Certainly I will. What is it that you wish me to do?"

Mrs. Dawkes glanced over her shoulder, in apparent dread of being heard. Which was quite a foolish apprehension; for the south wing, enclosed within its strong walls, was quite apart from the rest of the house, and Fry, the only present inmate except themselves, sat in her far-off chamber, near the green-baize entrance door. Caroline bent towards her cousin and spoke; but in so low a tone that he did not catch the words, and had to ask her again.

"I—want—a—will—made," she slowly repeated.

"Have you not made one since the child died?"

"No—no."

"Then it is right and proper that you should make one. And without delay."

"Will you contrive that I shall do it? Will you help me? Will you take my instructions, and get it executed?"

"My dear, what ails you?" he rejoined. "The shortest way, the best way, will be for you to send for Mr. Norris, and give your instructions to him."

"That is the very thing I cannot do," she said. "She will take care that I don't make one."

He knew she alluded still to Miss Dawkes. "But she must let you make one; she cannot hinder you."

"Thomas, she is here to see that I don't make one. For no other purpose whatever, than that, is she put here to keep guard over me."

"Caroline, how can you have taken these ideas into your head?" he remonstrated, reverting again to the doubt whether her nervous state did not border on insanity. "A woman possessing the immense property that you do is bound to make a will."

"If I die without one, it goes to my husband—money, and land, and the Rock. Everything, nearly, would go to him."

"Of course, if you leave no will."

"Then do you not see now why he does not want me to make one; *why he will not permit me to make one;* why he puts his sister here, to watch over me that I don't make one? It would be too wearisome for *him* to remain on guard—let alone the issue we might come to—and so he leaves *her* on duty."

"I hope you are mistaken," Thomas Kage gravely replied. "Major Dawkes must feel that he has little right to the whole vast fortune of Mr. Canterbury."

"He has no right to it, and he shall not have it!" she vehemently broke forth. "Oh, Thomas, Thomas," she continued, changing her tone to one of wailing, "why did I not listen to you, when you begged me not to suffer the money to be so left—not to inherit it, contingent on the death of my child?"

"Hush, Caroline! Do not, I say, recall the past."

"What possessed Mr. Canterbury to make so dangerous a will? what possessed my mother to incite him to it, and I to second her?" she went on, paying no attention to the interruption. "I wish it had been burnt; I wish the money and the Rock had been sunk at the bottom of the sea!"

"It was an unjust will, bordering, as I think, on iniquity; but why do you call it a dangerous one? How am I to understand the term as applied to Mr. Canterbury's will?"

"Do you *not* understand it?" she asked, with pointed emphasis. "I sit here in my solitude, in my terrible nervousness, and dwell on many things, real and unreal, on the past

and on the future ; and I have fancied that you foresaw how it might become dangerous. There was a day, in this very house, when you earnestly warned me against suffering such a will to stand ; when you seemed to be buried in a vision of the time to come, if I *did* let it stand, and shrank from it as from a dark shadow, from a haunting dream. I have not forgotten it, Thomas, or your words."

Neither had he ; but he did not choose to say so. The past was past ; and for many reasons he thought it well not to bring it back again.

"Caroline, we were speaking of the real, not of the ideal. I am unable to comprehend your position, as you seem to put it. You are mistress of this house, and of its servants. It is your own, absolutely ; your husband has legally no authority in it. If the presence of Miss Dawkes is not agreeable to you, politely request her to terminate her visit. Try and shake off this nervousness, my dear ; for nervousness it must be, and nothing else."

"If I only stirred in the matter, if I only said to her, 'Go,' it would bring *him*. They are acting in concert."

"What if it did? Though he is your husband, he cannot take from you your freedom of action. The whole property is yours, remember ; not subject to Major Dawkes's control."

"But there would be dreadful scenes, I say, and they would shatter me. Besides," she added, sinking her voice and glancing round with another of those looks of apprehensive terror, "I might be poisoned."

"Oh, Caroline!"

"Tom was, you know," she continued, staring at him with her wild eyes. "And I must make the will first."

Was she wandering now? Thomas Kage mentally debated the question, and with intense pain. "I wish to leave this wretched fortune—wretched it has been to me and mine—to its rightful owners : I wish to repair the injustice that was committed on the Miss Canterburys. Will you advise me whether Olive——"

"I cannot advise you on the disposal of your money," he interrupted, in a voice almost of alarm ; "neither will I inherit any of it, neither will I be the executor. Leave it as you think

well yourself; I must decline all interference. The money has lapsed to you, Caroline; my trusteeship is over; do not now request me to take it up again."

"But you will advise me how to leave my money?"

"No."

"Not advise me! What can be the motive for your refusal?"

"The motive is of no consequence, Caroline. You have experience to guide you now; you can take advice of yourself."

"But you must have a motive. Tell it me. If you do not, the wondering what it can be will worry me for days and nights; you don't know how weak I have grown. Thomas, I conjure you, tell it me."

He would have preferred not to tell her; at least, during this interview. But she left him no resource. In his straightforward truth he spoke; his voice somewhat low and unwilling.

"I am to marry Millicent Canterbury."

She looked down upon her thin white hands, clasped together, and did not speak. But for the crimson hue that stole over her face and neck, he would have thought she did not hear. Surely she must love him still! In spite of her two marriages, hers must indeed have been an enduring love.

"Well, be it so," she said at length. "Thomas, I am glad to hear it; or I shall be when the brunt of the news has a little passed. Do not mistake me. The old remembrances are upon me to-night, or I should not feel this. You could not have chosen a better girl than Leta. Indeed I am glad of it. I have never been so selfish as to wish you not to marry."

"You see, therefore, why I cannot and will not advise, as to leaving money to the Miss Canterburys," explained Mr. Kage, in a very matter-of-fact tone. "Individually, I would prefer that you did not, for it may be the means of separating me from Millicent; on the other hand, they have claims on their father's estate. I cannot advise or interfere."

"Chivalrous and honourable as usual! You are too much so, Thomas. Had you been less so——"

"What then?" he asked, for she did not continue.

"This conversation never would have had place, and my child would be here by my side, and I should not be dying."

What she said was too true; and he knew it. They had not been able to fight against fate. Little use, then, to picture now what might have been. Caroline had played him false to marry a wealthy man; and all the regret in the world, and the bitter repentance, would not alter it.

"I must get a will made," she resumed, breaking the silence. "Can you show me how it may be done? I am virtually a wretched prisoner, remember."

He thought it over for a moment. Assuming what she said to be a fact, there was difficulty in the prospect. "Let Mr. Norris come to you in the way I have done to-night, and take your instructions, Caroline."

She appeared to catch eagerly at the suggestion. "So he might! I had not thought of it. The fact is, it was only when I heard you were in the neighbourhood, and I was worrying myself to contrive how I could get to see you alone, that Fry suggested the opening of the postern-door. Yes, yes; Norris is honest, and I will send for him. I shall leave my husband nothing, Thomas."

"Leave him nothing!" exclaimed Mr. Kage, surprised into the remark. "Nothing? Would that be justice?"

"Justice and mercy too. I leave him my *silence;* and that is more mercy than he deserves. He poisoned my child."

"Hush!" rebuked Mr. Kage.

"He poisoned my child," she persisted, beginning to tremble.

They gazed into each other's eyes. Hers were fixed, wild, bright; his seriously questioning.

"Caroline, this is an awfully grave charge."

"It is a true one," she affirmed. "I have known it all along. I knew it when the coroner's inquest was sitting; I knew it when you all went to put Tom in the grave. He had a bottle of laudanum in his dressing-room, but I believe none of the inmates of the house, except myself, had noticed that he had it; and lucky for him they had not. That laudanum-bottle had been there for weeks, untouched; but it was missing from its place the evening Tom died. I looked for it, and it was gone; I wanted some to put to my tooth. Was it not strange that that very night, of all others, I should have looked for it, and only that night?"

Mr. Kage made no reply. He was lost in thought.

"I went to bed early that night, at eight o'clock; and after I was in bed, I got up to fetch the laudanum-bottle from his dressing-room. It was not there. I was amazed at its absence, because I knew it always was there, and I had seen it earlier in the day. Soon afterwards *he* came in; and when he saw me he started like a guilty man, and hurried something under his coat as he went through to his dressing-room. It must have been the bottle—it was the bottle! The next morning I saw the bottle in its place again. No one but himself had gone through my room that night; and therefore I knew that it was he who had replaced it. I thought nothing of it at the moment; no, nor even when the alarm of the death came."

"Allowing all this to be true—and I cannot disbelieve you—how could he have administered it to the child? Judith never left him."

"He did not administer it; Judith did that."

"*Judith!*" uttered Thomas Kage.

"Judith; but not intentionally. She believed, poor woman, when she gave him his dessert-spoonful of mixture that evening, that she was giving him his proper medicine. When she brought the child down to me, I did not send her back, but kept her talking; the nursery was therefore vacant. That was his opportunity. The mixture-bottle must have been then taken away, and the laudanum-bottle substituted. Oh, I assure you, Thomas, I have gone over all this so often since in my mind, that I seem to have seen it all done. Judith gave him a dessert-spoonful of the opium instead of his proper medicine. Major Dawkes must have waited in his room opposite; and when she had shut herself into the night-nursery, he went softly in and changed the bottles again, having taken out the same quantity of the rightful physic. I dare say he swallowed it. Then he came sneaking-down with the laudanum-bottle in his hand, little thinking I had been searching for it, or that I was in my room. I saw the next morning that some of the contents had been taken out."

"Were the bottles alike?"

"Exactly alike. Green-glass bottles, with about the same quantity of stuff in each; and the colour of the mixture and of

the laudanum tallied. The labels were not alike, but Judith cannot read writing."

"I know she cannot."

"'Tincture of Opium. Major Dawkes,' was on the one; 'The Mixture. Master Canterbury,' was on the other. Some days after the dreadful truth had revealed itself to me, I had Judith alone, and cautiously questioned her. She was in much distress, and confessed that a matter was preying on her mind. It was this: after she had given the mixture to the child that evening, he shook his head and said it was 'nasty,' which had never been his complaint before. In putting in the cork, her eye fell on the words of the label, and she thought they looked different—not the same she was accustomed to see; but in the impossibility (as she supposed) of its being any other label or bottle, she had concluded it was her fancy. The next morning by daylight, the old familiar writing seemed to have returned to the bottle. Not until after the child was buried, she said, did this incident recur to her memory. It was strange that it should not; but I could not disbelieve her, for Judith was ever truthful."

"Did you do well to conceal these circumstances?" inquired Mr. Kage, in a low tone. "They might have been investigated."

"Had I known them—had they presented themselves to my mind at the moment of my boy's death, I should inevitably have proclaimed them to the world. But Fry was hasty with her opinion that he must have died in a fit; the major seconded it; and I thought it was so, in my wild grief. When the doctors had held their post-mortem examination, and declared the cause of his death to be opium, the news of which was brought in by Fry, then the truth flashed upon me—in a confusion of ideas at first; but, little by little, each distinct point grew, and stood out with awful clearness."

"He came down to my chambers that night, asking me to advance some of the child's money," murmured Thomas Kage.

"Oh yes, that was a part of his cunning scheme," was Mrs. Dawkes's bitter answer. "He had laid his plans well, be you sure of that, to divert suspicion from himself. He went to you that you might testify, if needful, that he was away in the evening; he asked to borrow the money—knowing that you were not

likely to lend it—that it might be assumed he saw no prospect at that, the eleventh hour, of succeeding to my boy's. He slept out, that it should be seen *he* had not gone near Tom to harm him, and hoping to be away when the alarm occurred."

"And you have not spoken of this!"

"Never, until this night. How could I? No one suspects the part he took, unless it be Judith, and—no doubt—Miss Dawkes. Fry does not; she would abuse the doctors by the hour together in my presence, for saying Tom died from opium, seeing he could not have got at any; but I stop her always. Can you wonder," added Caroline, in an altered tone, "that I have lived since in fear—in nervous dread—and that I dare not provoke an open rupture with the man I once called husband?"

"Did you ever hint at your suspicions to him?"

"Only once. If ever I thought to do it, my tongue seemed to dry in my mouth, my heart to sicken. On the day of the inquest, he came in to condole with me after it was over—the false hypocrite! and I suddenly spoke to him. 'That bottle of laudanum you kept in your dressing-room was away from its place the evening Tom died; where was it?' He was taken by surprise, and turned as white as ashes; his lips were ghastly and tremulous, as they strove to say that the bottle was not away from its place, so far as he knew. That look alone would be sufficient to prove his guilt. I said no more; I only gazed steadily at him, and he turned away. I could not be the first to accuse him; he had been my husband; had any one else done so I should have said what I knew. We have lived an estranged life since then; to appearance outwardly civil. I came here the next day, with my dreadful secret; he has been down once or twice, and we go through the ceremony of hand-shaking at his arrival and departure; and she is here—my keeper."

Mr. Kage leaned his head upon his hand.

"Yes, I am here with my dreadful secret," she reiterated; "and he is living in a whirl of gaiety, of sin. I sometimes wonder whether the past lies a burden upon him also, in the silence of the accusing night."

"A dreadful secret indeed!" Thomas Kage echoed, wiping his brow. "Caroline, why did you tell it me?"

"Not for you to accuse and betray him; not to repeat again. When this conversation shall be over, you can bury it in the solitude of your own breast, and leave him to his conscience and the future. But I could not go to my grave without telling *you* what has sent me there."

Mr. Kage sat thinking—thinking over the chain of events from their commencement. The foolish marriage of Mr. Canterbury with this young girl; the unjust will; the dangerous clause of the great fortune reverting to her should the child die. Yes, dangerous; Mrs. Dawkes had called it by its right name. Dangerous if she married a needy and unscrupulous second husband.

"Oh, but it was an awful temptation!" he exclaimed aloud; not to her, but in self-communing. "Awful, awful, to such a one as Dawkes. Poor man!"

"You say 'poor man!' You pity him?"

"Not his guilty weakness in yielding to it; not his wicked sin; but I pity him for his exposure to the temptation. Better that Mr. Canterbury had left his money to revert to his daughters after the child; better that he had left it to the county hospital."

"Did you think of this horrible contingency when you urged me, almost with a prayer, not to inherit after my child?"

"Do not recur to what I thought," he sharply cried, as if the question struck an unpleasant chord within him. "I am given to flights of fancy, and don't know what I may have thought."

"I will send for Norris," she resumed; "he must come in as you came to-night. You see now why I dare not venture to let it be known that I wish to make a will. Major Dawkes comes into all after my death; he sees that I cannot last long—*she* sees it. Of course they will not let me make a will."

"Yes, I see, Caroline."

"Were I to insist upon it—were they only to suspect that I wished to make one, that I so much as thought of it, they—he—might put me out of the way as he put Tom," she said, with glistening eyes.

It was altogether so strange and sad a thing, that Thomas Kage scarcely liked to leave her. But it must be. He took her hands in his when he rose to say farewell, bending over her.

"I shall come in state to the front entrance to-morrow, Caroline, and pay you a formal visit, as though we had not met since you left London."

"Since the day of my boy's funeral! Do so. She will be in the room all the time; there's no chance of any visitor being allowed to see me alone. Good night, good night; we shall not meet many more times in this world."

"Caroline," he lingered to whisper, an anxious look arising to his own face, "are you prepared for the next?"

"I think of it as a rest from weary sorrow; I think of it as a place of loving pardon and peace. I wish I was better fitted for it."

"Why do you not send for Mr. Rufort?"

"She would not let him come to be with me alone."

"She must let him; she shall let him."

"Thomas, let me get the will made first, and I shall be more at ease. I am in no immediate danger."

"Good night, my dear child. Keep up your spirits."

Mrs. Dawkes touched a silver hand-bell, and Fry came quickly out of a room at the end of the corridor, one close to the new baize door. Thomas Kage saw the door as he looked that way. Fry conducted him down the dusty stairs, and out at the rusty postern entrance to the mass of entangled shrubs; and he picked his way through them lost in thought, deeply pondering on the revelations his visit had brought forth.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ON THE WATCH.

An enemy could not have said that Keziah Dawkes was unkind to her brother's wife. With the exception that she never quitted that unhappy lady for more than two minutes together throughout the day, she was as kind to her as kind could be. Keziah, made of as hard iron as it is possible for a woman to be, could not but have some grains of compassion for the delicate girl (she was little more than a girl yet) wasting away to death

under her eyes. It might be that she had qualms of remorse also. Not for the watching: Keziah thought her sister-in-law none the worse for that. Not on her own score at all; but for a certain event that might be lying on her brother's conscience, and of which she strove to drive out intruding suspicions. They were too dreadful even for Keziah. Caroline's grief for her poor child was pitiable to witness, and Keziah felt for her in regard to that.

When Mrs. Dawkes would come downstairs in the morning, be it early or be it late, there sat Keziah waiting for her, and beguiling the waiting with some everlasting knitting. After that, she stuck to Mrs. Dawkes throughout the day, her very shadow. If Caroline strolled out in the garden, to sit on the wintry bench, wrapped up in furs (a rare occurrence), Keziah and her knitting went too; when Caroline walked or drove over to see her mother, Keziah was her companion; if, by rare chance, visitors called at the Rock, Keziah sat in the drawing-room by the side of its mistress. Only in her own chamber was Caroline free. It was this disagreeable espionage that caused her to remove into the south wing, and have a door erected. *Not*, at that time, had the slightest thought of the postern-door, as a possible means of admittance to her own friends, crossed her mind. It never might have been thought of, or so used, but for the happy suggestion of her maid Fry. Fry lived in a chronic state of resentment against Miss Dawkes, and was warmly attached to her mistress. Any way, then, that she could find to "circumvent" the former (Fry's own word, in her whispered confidences to the butler) was more welcome to her than flowers in May.

But Fry had opposed the removal to the south wing. Edgar Canterbury had died in those rooms; they had never been inhabited since; and for her mistress to go into them she looked upon as boding ill-luck—nothing less than an omen that she would die in them, in her turn. Keziah came to the rescue, and said Mrs. Dawkes might remove into them if she liked—why not? All unconscious was she of the heavy blow it might be the means of eventually dealing her brother. And so poor Caroline took up her abode in the long-unused wing; and very shortly afterwards caused that intervening door,

covered with green baize, to be erected, shutting out the wing from the rest of the house and from Keziah.

Keziah did not care: if Mrs. Dawkes chose to pass part of her days in seclusion, with Fry in attendance upon her, why, let her; it was only a relief to Keziah. *She* could take care that no chance visitor was admitted to the south wing unaccompanied by herself. Never did it enter into Keziah's imagination—no, not in its wildest dreams—that an *outer* door existed to that south wing. She had never heard of it. The postern-door, encompassed by the wilderness of trees and shrubs around, was invisible to the eye.

In the midst of this wilderness (as was related earlier in the story) stood the Lady's Well; and this had so sure a reputation for being haunted—the lady's ghost, as was well known, appearing at will, and shrieking frightfully on windy nights—that no one ever thought of penetrating to that side of the house. And therefore, in the lapse of time, the postern-door came to be entirely forgotten by the few who had been cognizant of its existence.

In after-life, Fry was wont to say that nothing less than a special revelation had made *her* remember it the evening when Thomas Kage was at Chilling. But Keziah Dawkes knew nothing of the postern-door; and when her sister-in-law was shut up within that wing, she supposed her to be as safe as if she were in her own presence. What though Caroline did take freaks at times to bar the green door against her? She was welcome to do it for Keziah, who supposed it arose from simple caprice, or a real desire for solitude.

Caroline was correct in the opinion she had expressed to Thomas Kage, that what they feared was, that she might make a will. Of course this could not, in the major's interests, be allowed; neither did they intend it should be. All the watching was on this score: there existed no other cause for it. Keziah had little fear. Caroline seemed to be overwhelmed with apathy—to have no more thought or care for the future disposal of her property than if it had been a tract of land in the wilds of Africa. She seemed to care for nothing, She had never attempted to write a letter since she came to the Rock; her days were passed in inert sadness—in one long monotony; and Keziah believed this would continue to the end.

As well, perhaps, that she did not attempt to write letters: they would not have been permitted to go out of the house without a supervision, so that it might have come to the same in the end. Keziah watched always; she would never relinquish the watching so long as Caroline lingered in life; but she was as sure as sure could be that it was an entirely superfluous precaution. And meanwhile she did not intend that Mrs. Dawkes should see she was watched, and had no suspicion Caroline had already detected it.

"Whatever can your mistress do with herself, shut in all alone evening after evening, with not a soul to speak to?" Keziah had said to Fry only a day or two before this visit of Thomas Kage's. "She must be frightfully lonesome."

"For the matter of that, Miss Dawkes, she has been nothing else but lonesome ever since the poor boy died," was Fry's answer. "As to what she does, she mostly lies on the sofa, sometimes with a book, oftener without one. All she wants is to lie in quiet, where folks won't come in to bother her with talking."

A hint for Keziah. Fry's words were honest; and Miss Dawkes was aware she had always been objectionable to her young sister-in-law. Caroline dared not order her out of the house, as she would have done in former days. In her broken spirit, and with the remembrance of the child's death and its attendant circumstances ever upon her, she had grown to be terribly afraid of Keziah and Barnaby. She removed to the south wing from no other motive than to be sometimes free of the former's presence, and stayed there as a refuge. But as the days went on, and she was drawing (as she fully believed) nearer to death, the obligation to make a will pressed itself with greater urgency upon her, until it seemed to grow into a religious duty that she must not fail in if she would find peace with Heaven.

A fine bright morning—the one following the secret visit of Mr. Kage—and Keziah Dawkes sat at her solitary but sumptuous breakfast full of complacency. Caroline took hers in her own chamber. Fry urged her to take it in bed; but there seemed to be ever a restlessness upon her that prevented her lying long once morning had dawned. Sitting in her arm-chair by the fire, partially dressed only, and wrapped in her dressing-gown

of lavender silk, Mrs. Dawkes generally took her breakfast from the small low stand drawn close before her.

"I wonder what she'll do to-day?" thought Keziah, as, her meal over, she sat with her head upon her hand. "She said something yesterday about wanting to call on the Miss Canterburys. I'm sure I hope she won't. 'Don't let her get intimate with those women,' said Barby to me when he was down here last; and he is quite right. On the other hand, if she *will* call, I suppose she must. It may not do to draw the reins too tight. I wish to goodness the downright cold weather would set in!"

Rising from her chair, Keziah gave a shake to the folds of her grey merino morning-dress with its black trimmings, and passed out to betake herself to the south wing. Ascending the stairs, she went through the picture-gallery to a small corridor which brought her to the green-baize door. Opening it at will, she was in the south wing. It contained four rooms only, and a dark lumber-closet, panelled with oak, in which receptacle were stowed away sundry articles that had belonged to Edgar Canterbury. The door of the staircase descending to the postern entrance was in this closet; and Keziah had seen it one day that she chose to take a look round on Mrs. Dawkes's first removal; but it looked exactly like one of the panels, and Keziah suspected nothing. Of these four rooms, two were Caroline's—her sitting and bed-rooms; the small one next the baize door Fry sat in; the fourth was not used. Keziah walked along the passage, carpeted lately, and knocked at Mrs. Dawkes's chamber.

"Come in," came the faint, spiritless answer.

Caroline sat in the elbow-chair, in the pretty silk gown, her golden hair falling upon it in curly waves, as it was mostly allowed to fall now. Keziah took her hand.

"How are you, my dear, this morning?"

"Oh, about the same, I think," was the listless reply. "I've not coughed much in the night. It's very fine—is it not?"

"Beautifully fine; but so sharp and cold. I don't think it will do for you to venture into the air to-day, Caroline."

"I am not thinking of venturing into it, that I know of,"

returned Caroline, peevishly. "I shall see when I come down."

"And, my dear, is there anything particular that you could fancy for luncheon?"

"No."

A few more of these questions and answers, a little chat on Keziah's part—items of news she had read in the journal last night—and then she withdrew; and Caroline was left alone, to have her dressing completed by Fry.

About twelve o'clock, she went downstairs, dressed for the day in her black silk, her hair gathered up in order. Keziah drew a warm chair to the fire, and hastened to bring one of the richly-painted white-velvet footstools. Close upon this the old doctor came in. He had been medical attendant to the Rock as long as the Canterburys had inhabited it—a hale, simple-minded gentleman, turned seventy now, with fresh-coloured cheeks and white hair. Mr. Owen's daily visits were the only break in Caroline's monotonous life. As he sat there to-day, telling of various outdoor interests, he mentioned the arrival of Mrs. Dunn and of Mr. Kage.

Caroline's cheeks grew scarlet, knowing that she had to appear as if it were *news;* and her attempt at doing so was rather a poor one; but Keziah failed to notice: in her own intense, and not pleasurable surprise, she observed nothing.

"Mr. Kage!" exclaimed Keziah. "What!—Thomas Kage?"

"Yes; I don't know any other Mr. Kage," was the surgeon's answer. "He arrived here yesterday evening, he tells me, and is staying at the inn."

"But, Mr. Owen, what has he come for?"

"To see the old place again, I suppose, Miss Dawkes. I didn't ask him."

Keziah lapsed into silence, pondering over certain interests with herself. She thought it very undesirable that any communication should take place between Mr. Kage and Caroline, and wondered what ill wind could have blown him to Chilling just now. Who was to know that he, connected as he had been with the child's property, might not be urging his cousin to make a will?

"Of course, he will come to call on me," suddenly spoke

Caroline, the first words she had uttered. "Mr. Owen, if you see him, tell him that he must not go away without calling on me."

Rather lame words, as Keziah might have thought, but that she was so preoccupied with her own reflections. For Thomas Kage to come to Chilling and *not* call to see Caroline would have been an anomaly.

When Mr. Owen left, Keziah, as was her frequent custom, went with him to the hall. She was in the habit of evincing much anxiety that Caroline's health should be restored, her life prolonged.

"No, I do not think her any better, Miss Dawkes," was the doctor's answer to the query; and at the same moment Fry, happening to see them from the back of the hall, came forward to join in the colloquy. "Looks brighter, you fancy? Nonsense! She's flushed, if you will; flushed with nervousness and sleeplessness. I tell you she is nearly as weak as a woman can be, my dear madam, short of absolute helplessness. The poor young thing is eating away her heart with grief for her child; and my emphatic opinion is—and has been, you know, Miss Dawkes, for some time—that the solitude she lives in is not good for her."

"And so I say," put in Fry, who did not at all like the solitude on her own account. "To mope all alone cannot be good for any one. She never does an earthly thing but read a bit—as I've told you, Mr. Owen—and that not for five minutes together. But if she *won't* be roused, why, she won't—and there it is."

"Ah," concluded the doctor, as he took his departure; "it's one of those sad cases, I'm afraid, that all our care and skill, exert them as we will, are unable to touch."

A comforting assurance for the interests of Barnaby Dawkes. Keziah heard it with an unruffled face, and turned indoors.

The next visitor to make his appearance was Thomas Kage. The sun was at its meridian when he was shown in, and poor Caroline sat where its rays could fall on her wan face. She seemed strangely passive; a little faint colouring might flush into the face, but she did not rise from her chair; only let him take her hand in silence. The emotion of the meeting had spent itself the previous night. Caroline, besides, was afraid

lest an incautious word should betray that it had taken place, and so kept still. Keziah Dawkes, sitting quite inconveniently near, was agreeably surprised at the apathetic character of the interview. Keziah talked. Mr. Kage talked. Caroline scarcely spoke a word. But the conversation turned solely on commonplace nothings; and, so far as Keziah could see, Mr. Kage's visit to Chilling had been made without reference to Mrs. Dawkes. She would have liked to knit a thanksgiving for it into her knitting.

"Caroline," he said, "do you know that you are looking quite painfully thin?"

"Yes; painfully so; you have used the right word, Thomas. I know it more and more every day when they dress me, for my things hang upon me now like bags."

"You should have some change. Staying in this solitude at the Rock cannot be good for you. Miss Dawkes, I think you might have perceived this before, and suggested to Major Dawkes that something should be tried."

Miss Dawkes let her knitting fall on her gown, and stared at Caroline with a face of concern, as if she saw the signs of sickness for the first time. As her eye met, quite accidentally, that of Mr. Kage, a vivid recollection of the interview she had once held with him in her sick despair flashed into her mind, bringing a tinge to her leaden cheek. Perhaps she thought of the contrast between Barnaby's hopeless condition then and his flourishing state now; or—perhaps the flush arose because she feared Mr. Kage must be thinking of it.

"Caroline does look thin; unusually so to-day," she quietly replied. "I hope a little time will see an improvement. She is unwilling to stir from home."

"I shall never stir from home until I am carried out of it," interposed Caroline. "What does it matter where I am—here or elsewhere? It won't be for so very long."

"But, Caroline, you should not indulge this kind of thought," said Mr. Kage, in a tone of remonstrance.

"Why not? I do not wish to live. And if I did wish it, it would be all the same, for I know that nothing can prolong my existence. When they took my boy's life, they virtually took mine."

The last sentence was evidently not spoken with any invidious

meaning. Mr. Kage made no observation. Keziah was picking-up some stitches that had dropped.

"I should like to go to Tom. When he used to wish to be with the angels, I wondered greatly. I could not understand it. But I wish it now myself—to go away and be with the angels—and with him."

Keziah lifted her eyes and telegraphed a confidential look to Mr. Kage. It meant to say, "Don't notice her; this comes of low spirits." He made no answering sign: he believed it came of the *truth*—and that she was following her little son as quickly as was possible.

"Caroline, do you see Mr. Rufort?"

"No."

"But you ought to do so. Speaking in a worldly point of view only, his visit would do you good; he is a very agreeable man. And—if there be any graver necessity——"

"The last time he came Miss Dawkes sent word out I was too poorly to be seen," interrupted Caroline.

"And so you were, my dear," cried that affectionate lady, in a sweetly soothing tone.

"And the time before that you went out and met him, and he turned back again; and another time you told me he had been to the cottages on the common where scarlet-fever was, and that it would not do for him to come in to me then," quietly went on Caroline.

Mr. Kage turned his luminous eyes on Miss Dawkes. Questioning eyes just then.

"My dear Caroline, Mr. Rufort can come to you every day, if you like," said the guardian dragon, who felt scared out of the best part of her equanimity in the presence of Mr. Kage. "I'll drop him a note, my dear, to-day."

A little more conversation, bringing forth no particular fruit, and then luncheon was announced. Mr. Kage rose to leave, declining the invitation to stay. Caroline got up as he took her hands. She was visibly agitated. "Shall I see you again, Thomas? Shall I ever see you again?"

"Ever?—yes, I hope so. Not this time, I fear, for I leave for London to-morrow morning. You can write to me news of how you go on, and——"

"I never write," interrupted Caroline. "It is too much exertion for me now. I have not written a word to any one, Thomas, since the blow fell."

"Perhaps Miss Dawkes, then, will drop me a line, should there be any change," he rejoined, glancing at that lady. "Should you need me in any way, Caroline, I will come."

Miss Dawkes graciously acceded: promising and vowing to write on any and every occasion that Mr. Kage could possibly be wished for. Without, however, having the smallest intention of doing it.

"Why are you going so soon?" resumed Caroline. "I think you might take this one meal with me."

"I agreed to take it at Miss Canterbury's."

"As you please, of course. I am nothing to any one now, and shall soon be less."

Her subdued voice spoke of pain, hot tears stood in her eyes. Thomas Kage held out his arm to lead her to the dining-room, and sat down by her side. His heart smote him for the unkindness he would have committed. Never again, in all probability, would the opportunity be afforded him of taking the meal with her; whereas he would most likely often take it in future times and seasons with the Miss Canterburys.

And she was gratified: there was no doubt of that. A soft pink shone on her cheeks, a light in her eyes; and she talked a little. Keziah, almost ignored, glanced up again and again surreptitiously from her place below, as she revelled in the delicacies provided. But Caroline ate nothing. The wing of a partridge was on her plate, but she merely toyed with it; and the pink faded again, and the bright eyes grew dim. Every soothing attention that Thomas Kage could give, he did give. Perhaps the remembrance of the first dinner he had ever eaten in this magnificent room, when she was by his side, but not then the Rock's mistress, lay on both of them. Could they have foreseen at that happy banquet the fruits that a few years would bring forth! Time does indeed work strange changes.

The meal over, Mr. Kage, preparing finally to depart, held out his hand again to Caroline. Instead of responding to it, she took his arm, and went with him outside the door. Keziah came flying up with a warm cloak—the ostensible plea—and

stuck herself close to Caroline's side. It was a warm lovely day for late autumn: quite a contrast to the cold of the preceding one, the wind—what slight wind there was—being in its softest quarter. Mr. Kage turned his steps to the right, towards the side-gate.

"Why are you going this way, Thomas?"

"I shall cross over to your mamma's cottage, Caroline. I must see her this afternoon, and this is the nearest way."

At the gate, to which they walked in silence, Caroline halted, not loosing his arm. Miss Dawkes, making pretty remarks upon the scenery and the weather, was patient as any tame lapdog. "I think I will go with you, Thomas. I can walk as far as that."

This did arouse Miss Dawkes. In the first place, the continued companionship with Thomas Kage was not desirable; every moment she was on greater thorns lest he might accidentally hit on so undesirable a topic of conversation as the ultimate disposal of the vast property on which he trod. In the second, Keziah had nothing on her head, and was very subject to faceache.

"*Walk* to Mrs. Kage's!" she exclaimed, almost with a scream. "My dear Caroline, you must not attempt it. The last time you could hardly get home; that's a fortnight ago, and you are weaker since then."

"But I had not my cousin's arm to lean upon, Miss Dawkes," was the cold answer. "Thomas, I should like to go, if you will not mind the trouble of walking back with me. I feel that it might do me good."

Without a word of dissent, he took her through the gate, and bade her lean all her weight upon him. Had there never been any feeling between them but that arising from relationship, he might have passed his arm round her waist to help her on her way. But the very consciousness of what had been had made him throughout her married life more carefully respectful to her. And so they walked along—Caroline in her warm woollen cloak and hood, Keziah in nothing.

"There is not the slightest necessity for you to come, Miss Dawkes," said Caroline, stopping to speak. "Mr. Kage will take care of me."

"Oh, my dear, I *couldn't* be so unkind as suffer you to go alone," returned Keziah. "Don't mind me."

"I am not alone. You have no bonnet on."

"It is quite delightful, dear, to be without a bonnet this sweet day. I'm sure it's like summer," responded Keziah, shivering just a little, and wishing Mrs. Dawkes could be taken with a fit, or any other ailment that might stop the expedition. "Mr. Kage, how is your sister Charlotte?"

"Mrs. Lowther? Quite well, and busy and happy as usual with her many children."

"*Does* Mr. Lowther get on any better?" continued Keziah, in a tone of compassion.

"Thank you, he does. Lowther has turned the lane at last, and is in a fair way of accumulating a fortune. Mrs. Garston's legacy to his wife has been the means of effecting it."

"Oh!" said Keziah.

They came to the barrier in the field where the stile used to be. It was a gate now. How vividly the spot brought back that unhappy day to Thomas Kage, when he had found Caroline talking there with George Canterbury, and the blow she had dealt himself within a few minutes of it! He had never been the same man since. And she, the vain, heartless girl, had grown into this poor, sickly, spiritless shadow, leaning on his arm, soon, very soon, to die.

Mrs. Kage was a worse spectacle—a miserable dried-up mummy, who had some little remains of mind left; but no capability of comfort in life. She could not eat and drink as she used to do; *that* had remained her chief solace, and that was leaving her. She sat huddled up in her chair in the bedroom, close to the fire, and was the veriest object Mr. Kage had ever looked upon. At the first moment he started back. No rouge now, no teeth, no false hair; when mortals get very near the grave, these adjuncts are left off. She was wrapped up in an old blue-silk cloak lined with ermine, that had once been young Mrs. Canterbury's; her palsied fingers kept catching at the fastening cord and tassels. Oh, what a wreck it was! What a wreck both were! What good had George Canterbury's money, that they so schemed for, brought to either? Thomas Kage could not help a fancy coming over

him that it must have entailed evil. Blinking upwards, she at length recognized her visitors. Caroline and Mr. Kage sat down by her; Keziah put herself on the other side, almost into the fire. The sight of Thomas Kage appeared to reawaken the palsied woman to memories and interests.

"What's the matter with her?" she suddenly asked, touching Caroline, but addressing Mr. Kage.

"I do not know. I am grieved to see her looking so ill."

"She's dying. I know it. Every time she comes to see me there's less life in her. What do you do to her—you and that false brother of yours?"

The latter query was directed with a raised voice and menacing gesture to Miss Dawkes. That lady, receiving it in silence, stared a little; it took her by surprise.

"I should like *you* to ask it, Thomas; and to require an answer from them. I can't, and I've no one here to do it for me or to speak to. They are killing her between them. He'll get all the money, you know."

Keziah's grey face took a tinge of purple. This turn in the conversation was by no means agreeable. Caroline was the one to break the silence.

"Mamma, do not let my state of health trouble you. I am as happy at the Rock as I should be anywhere else; happier perhaps. Major Dawkes has gone his own way this many a day, and I have gone mine. As to Miss Dawkes here, she is as attentive to me as can be."

Mrs. Kage blinked out at the three and shook her head. The matter was too complicated for her weakened mind to deal with or retain long. Again she bent towards Thomas Kage, and lowered her voice to a loud whisper.

"If the time could come over again, Thomas, I wouldn't urge her to marry into the Rock. We might have been better off had we stayed as we were. Where's the boy?"

"The boy!" stammered Mr. Kage, all too conscious of the secret that lay upon him.

"What did he die of, that sweet little boy? I have dark dreams about it, I can tell you. I wonder if the major has?"

Caroline rose, pleading fatigue. Keziah—her face a bright purple now—glanced round to see if the curious hint affected

the company, and thought *not*, which was satisfactory. One thing Keziah did not bargain for—the strangely-expressive look that sat in Mr. Kage's eyes, as her glance happened to meet his. Keziah had felt cold outside from want of a bonnet; she turned far colder now.

They got safely out from the presence of the poor old woman, who seemed to have taken up some undesirable fancies, and whose last words were a loud lamentation over her daughter's ill-starred marriage with Barnaby Dawkes. It was now that Thomas Kage contrived to get a couple of minutes' private conversation with Caroline, in spite of Keziah's dragon-like precaution. That bonnetless lady, not daring to risk uncovered the same cold walk back again, stayed behind to borrow a shawl of Mrs. Kage's maid: and the others went on together.

In a few, clear, concise, but rapid words, Thomas Kage inquired whether Caroline would wish to be anywhere else than at the Rock—whether she would choose to be an entirely free agent, and relieved of the espionage of Miss Dawkes; if so, he undertook that it should be at once accomplished. The secret he possessed gave him the power to act for her welfare in any way she pleased; and the major should not dare to lift voice or finger in opposition. But Caroline shook her head and refused. All she wanted was to be left in peace to the end.

The end! Mr. Kage had made it his business to see the surgeon, Owen, that morning, in regard to Mrs. Dawkes's state, and inquired whether anything could be done for her. Nothing at all, the doctor answered; it was too late. She was dying of a complication that Mr. Owen could not well understand—chest-weakness and grief and a kind of nervous irritability; dying slowly, no doubt, but quite surely. Neither Mr. Kage nor any other anxious friend could arrest the fiat.

With this knowledge within him, Thomas Kage could not urge any removal upon her. The last confidential word was spoken as Keziah's footsteps were heard. When she came hurrying up, a shawl pinned over her head, Mr. Kage was talking about the white clouds floating gently across the deep-blue sky. Keziah began pathetically to deplore the "wander-

ing state" of poor dear Mrs. Kage. Mrs. Kage's daughter agreed that it was very pitiable. Not for the world would Caroline have aroused any suspicions in Keziah; for who could tell what might come of them? The one earnest desire lay on her mind and heart like a nightmare—to succeed in getting a will made.

"God bless and keep you, my dear Caroline!" were the murmured words of Thomas Kage, as he stood to say farewell when they reached the Rock. "I shall see you again, I hope, some time."

"Yes; in heaven," she answered, bursting into tears. "Thank you for your life-long kindness to me, Thomas; thank you for ever."

And in all the phases of their many meetings and separations, never had Thomas Kage's heart ached worse than it did now, when he wrung her hands, and quitted her for the last time. His career in life, so to speak, was beginning: hers was ending.

Oh, that miserable will of George Canterbury's! What good had it done to any one? what ill had it not wrought?

CHAPTER XXXIX.

SEARCHING FOR FENCING-STICKS.

Keziah Dawkes stood at the entrance-door of the Rock, in the light of the afternoon sun. It might have been thought that she was standing there to admire the view, so beautiful as seen from that elevated spot. Perhaps she was; and speculating upon the fast-approaching period when her beloved brother Barby—beloved still, as few brothers have been, in spite of his many sins, real or suspected, against Keziah and the world in general—should have this fine domain in absolute actual possession.

Her mood was one of complacency. Thomas Kage had gone away without any undesirable interference—he was barely out of sight even yet—and, so far as Keziah could understand, he was not likely to trouble them with a visit soon again. As

to poor Mrs. Dawkes, Keziah, in her hard way, did feel some pity for her. She was very young to die; but Keziah comforted herself with this consolation—that *she* could not help it. If Mrs. Dawkes was sick with a sickness that would, apparently, only end in death, and not long first either, it was certainly no fault of hers. She had not helped her to the sickness or the sorrow—was not responsible for it in any way whatsoever.

Upon coming in from the walk, and parting with Thomas Kage just within the hall, Caroline said she felt weary and would go to her room to rest, desiring not to be disturbed. Keziah acquiesced, speaking some kind words, and accompanied her to the foot of the stairs quite affectionately. It was in returning, that the rays from the western sun, streaming into the hall through the open entrance-door, drew Keziah out by their brightness. The shawl, borrowed from Mrs. Kage's maid, was wrapped round her still; Keziah felt quite comfortable, and stayed there thinking, as if she meant to make it her abode for the rest of the day.

"Quite the best thing she could do," murmured Keziah, and the words applied to the retreat of her sister-in-law to rest in the south wing. "She is quiet there, and Fry's at hand to wait on her, and it saves me an immense deal of trouble. It *is* a strain to have to make conversation without ceasing for a person with whom you have no sympathies in common; or, rather, who has none with you. As to that horrible old Mrs. Kage, I could have found it in my heart to put a pitch-plaster on her mouth. She is more knave than fool. Talk of her being imbecile, indeed! Just because Thomas Kage was present, she said—that! Caroline did not take it up; that was a blessing; neither did he; but there was a look in his eyes I did not like to see. Thanks be to all the saints that the man has gone again! If he were to stay in the neighbourhood, mischief might come of it. Only to think of her walking there and back because *he* was going to walk! He has great influence over her. And he is one of those inconveniently straightforward men who might prove troublesome if his suspicions were aroused as to—to anything. I should like to know what brings him down here. Not Caroline's interests, though—as I feared when old Owen first said he was come.

I'm sure my heart leaped into my mouth; I felt that I ought to telegraph to Barby. But it's all right. I'll just mention that he has been here when I write to Barby presently; and if Barby chooses—— My goodness! why, there he is!"

The last words applied to Barby himself. An open fly had driven in and was approaching the hall-steps; in its inmate—a gentleman who leaned back with rather a pompous air—Keziah surely thought she recognized Barby. Did the sun's rays deceive her?—they were shining right into her eyes, dazzling her sight—and she thought it must be so. The traveller took off his hat, and gave it a gentle wave by way of greeting. It was Barby. Keziah sounded a peal on the visitors' bell to bring out the servants. Major Dawkes came up the steps, and Keziah received him with a warm embrace—which he did not seem to appreciate sufficiently. She led the way to the sitting-room, and stirred the fire into a blaze.

"All well?" asked the major, taking off his overcoat, and standing on the hearthrug to warm his hands.

"Quite well," answered Keziah. "Except that I fear Caroline grows weaker."

"Does she?—dear me! Where is she?" added the major, looking round the room.

"She has just gone to lie down, Barnaby. What will you take?"

"Nothing at present. Is Kage down here?"

And, with the last question, Keziah's understanding was opened: Major Dawkes must have heard of Mr. Kage's visit, and had come to checkmate it. Even so. Keziah was an accurate guesser. On the previous afternoon, chance, or luck, or whatever the genius might be that presided over the interests of Barnaby Dawkes, had taken that gentleman's lawyer to Mr. Kage's chambers. So vast a property as the major had dropped into—or, to be correct, his wife, but it came to the same practically—had its complications. More than once, Mr. Kage, as the previous acting trustee, had to be referred to for details connected with the past management. Some need of this kind took lawyer Jessup to the barrister's chambers, and there he heard that Mr. Kage had just gone down to Chilling. Later in the day, another chance, or

accident, caused Major Dawkes to call at his lawyer's—the objects of the two visits being quite unconnected with each other. While there, the lawyer incidentally mentioned the item of news he had heard—that Mr. Kage had gone to Chilling.

"To see your wife, major, no doubt," innocently quoth old Jessup, who had not the faintest notion of anything that might be involved, or of the sudden turn the suggestion gave the major.

"Ah, yes, possibly so; they are cousins," drawled the major, stroking his black moustache, and relieving his feelings by a little mental swearing.

The major would have liked to drive direct to Paddington Station and take the first train for Chilling. That might not be, however; but he made arrangements to leave in the morning. Down he came, as fast as the engine would bring him; his mind rather inconveniently tormenting itself as to the motive that had taken Thomas Kage thither. That it was to see Mrs. Dawkes he assumed to be a matter of course; but—with what object? Conscience makes cowards of the best of us—it made a coward of the major oftener than his friends might think—and is apt to suggest all kinds of improbabilities. The least he feared was, that Mr. Kage had gone down to inform his wife she ought to make a will. There might be one or two things in life Major Dawkes dreaded more than that, but he dreaded it quite enough. She might be leaving half the fortune away from him, once she got the idea of a will put into her head, as the major's common sense told. He did not intend she should. Having come to revel in the sweets of wealth, it would not be pleasant to relinquish any of it. Major Dawkes was living rather a fast life, spending the late Mr. Canterbury's money wholesale. The principal he could not touch; but he made free as air with the large amount returned as interest.

Keziah, feeling at rest as to the reason of his sudden appearance, slipped off the shawl, and took up her knitting.

"Is Kage down here?"

"Yes."

"What has he come for?"

"I was asking the very same question of myself just as you arrived, Barnaby. I don't know."

"Where the deuce is he staying? In the house?"

"Certainly not," quietly answered Keziah, as she told, in a few words, all she knew of the matter—the hearing of his arrival from Owen the doctor, and Mr. Kage's subsequent visit. Major Dawkes listened with a gloomy brow.

"Oh yes, I dare say! It's all very well for you to tell me he is going back to-morrow morning, and will not call here again. I don't believe it."

"You may depend upon one thing, I think, Barnaby: that, whatever business may have brought him here, it is not connected with Caroline."

"You are a fool, Keziah," politely rejoined the major.

"Not where you are concerned," was Keziah's composed answer. "You never had cause to charge me with being that in the years gone by."

"Do you suppose she wrote for him?"

"Who? Caroline? I am sure she did not. She has never put pen to paper since we came to the Rock. Had you seen the quiet apathetic manner with which she received him when he came in this morning, you would put aside all idea of her having sent for him—or of her wishing to see him either."

"The man must want something, Keziah. He wouldn't come all this cursed long railway journey for pleasure. What interests has he in Chilling but Caroline? Don't tell me."

Keziah, knitting always, silently revolved the points in her mind. There was reason in what Barby said. On the other hand, she could not disbelieve her sight, and ears, and senses generally. Thomas Kage had paid only a formal call, as any other stranger might do, and was certainly not coming again.

"That man has been a sort of enemy to me through life; cropping up at all kinds of unseasonable times," observed the major, giving the hearthrug a passionate kick.

"But you have always managed to hold your own against him in the long-run," quietly returned Keziah.

"Yes, and will still. I'm sure I wish the fellow was buried; there's no man living I——" Major Dawkes came to a sudden pause. "I dread so much as him," had been the words on the tip of his tongue. But it was not always convenient to speak out his full thoughts, even to Keziah.

"Look here, Keziah. The man must have come down on some matter connected with Caroline; and I don't care what you say to the contrary. He may have got it in his head—and my firm belief is that he has—that she ought to make a will. Considering the faculty he has for mixing himself up in other people's affairs, it's only what he might be expected to do. He has come here to see whether she has done it, and to suggest it to her."

"I tell you no, Barnaby," reiterated Keziah. "He did not hint at such a thing; he never said a word to her that any one could disapprove off. The conversation was upon the most indifferent topics you can imagine. I was with them all the time."

Major Dawkes twirled the corners of his moustache savagely. Things did not look absolutely clear.

"Does *she* ever express a wish to make one?"

"Never. I do not suppose the thought or wish has occurred to her. I feel quite sure she looks upon you as her legal successor here."

"And of course I am such," interjected the major.

"One day last week we were on the lawn; Caroline sat down to rest; things were looking beautiful. A remark slipped from me quite involuntarily, that I hoped you, when you were sole master here, would keep the gardeners to their duty, as they were kept now. 'Yes, indeed; if I thought otherwise, I should be sorry to leave the place,' she answered. Barnaby, rely upon it, she has no thought of leaving anything away from you."

The major felt a little reassured. "A will is an inconvenient article, you see, Keziah. Once a man (or woman) sets himself to make one, he may be led away to leave no end of property to individuals indiscriminately."

"Ease your mind," was Keziah's assuring answer. "Caroline has no thought of doing it; and if she had, I am at hand, remember. She is in a state of complete apathy. I don't believe she cares one iota whose the property is, or who will inherit it after her."

The major dropped his coat-tails, which he had picked up under his arm, and moved off the hearthrug. "I'll go up and

see her. South wing, isn't it? A curious freak, to take up her abode in that gloomy place."

"She is quiet there, you see; and to be quiet is all she cares for now. As to the wing being gloomy, I think the rooms are very nice and comfortable."

"And look out on a howling wilderness," observed the major. "If I recollect rightly, that is the chief prospect the window possess."

"There are some charming hills and other scenery in the distance."

"Every one to his taste: distant hills possess no attractions for me."

Without giving himself the trouble to knock, the major opened the green-baize door, which was rarely bolted in the daytime, and entered. Fry came running out of the room close by, and stood in utter astonishment at sight of the visitor.

"Which room is your mistress in?"

"She—she's in her sitting-room, sir," was Fry's answer, when surprise allowed her to speak. "I'll tell her you are here."

Caroline was lying on the sofa. She felt equally surprised with Fry at sight of the major, but did not evince it. Rising from the sofa, she coldly shook hands with him, and then sat down on it. The major had seemed to understand for some time now that he must not attempt any warmer greeting.

"How are you, my dear?" inquired the major, taking up the position he had taken below—his back to the fire.

"Middling. I am not very strong."

"Dear me! You look pretty well, too."

At that moment perhaps she did. A red flush, born of aversion and other complicated feelings, had risen to her face latterly whenever he appeared in her presence, and was illumining it now. "I've been wanting to run down for this week past; couldn't get the time until yesterday," cried the truthful major. "Lots of duties on hand just now in town."

"A pity you left them."

"Came down to see you and Kez, and how things were getting on here. Wish you could pick up a bit, my dear."

Mrs. Dawkes, sitting in what seemed to be the completest state of apathy, made no response. He began again.

"Hear you've had a visitor to-day—Kage. Awfully astonished to find he was down here. Passed him in the street in town but a few days ago."

Again no answer.

"What has Kage come to Chilling for?

"I did not ask him."

"Lively and agreeable this," thought the major. And no doubt it was.

"I hope Kage came for the purpose of seeing you, Caroline, my dear. It's good to be remembered by one's old acquaintances."

"He did not come to see me. If he had come for that, he would have said so."

"Does he make a long stay?"

"He goes again to-night, or to-morrow; I forget which he said. Keziah would know."

Beyond these short answers, nothing could the major get. He strove to make himself agreeable; told an amusing anecdote or two; but they sufficed not to arouse Caroline from her cold resentful state. The major swallowed down a dozen yawns.

"By the way," said he briskly, "there used to be some fencing-sticks of mine here. Do you happen to know where they were put?"

"I don't know anything about them."

"I had them here when we were first married, Caroline. Briscoe came down to stay, you may remember; and we used to come up to the big room of this wing—the one you make your bedchamber now, I suppose—and have a fencing-bout."

"I don't know anything about them," repeated she, in the same inert tone.

The major walked to the door and called Fry, telling her what he was inquiring after. "There was a lumber-closet somewhere here; we used to throw them into it when done with. Perhaps they are in it."

Fry felt discomposed. It was from this self-same lumber-closet that the way led down to the postern entrance. The major, suddenly remembering the position of the closet, threw open the door. A way had been cleared inside it for Mr. Kage

to come through on the previous night, consigning all the "lumber" to either side. It lay indiscriminately, one thing upon another. As the major stood contemplating the interior from the door—as well as the semi-light enabled him—he faced exactly the panelled entrance, so bare now.

Well indeed was it, for the sake of justice, that the panel gave to the eye no indication of its secret opening. Fry, her eyes dilating a little, made a furious onslaught on the lumber, and blocked up the cleared passage. The major, standing just inside, suddenly saw his wife at the entrance-door, her face pale and scared.

"What is it?" she asked. "What is the matter?"

"We are looking for the fencing-sticks. Don't you come, my dear."

"Look here," said Fry, stopping in her work. "If the major would leave me, and you'd leave me, ma'am, perhaps I might find them. I think I've seen them here."

"Whereabouts?" cried the major eagerly.

"I never can do anything when I'm looked at and bothered; my mistress knows I can't," was Fry's answer. "Both of you just leave me to myself, sir, and I'll find the sticks if they are to be found."

But, as she spoke, something caught the major's quick eye. He drew it up: it proved to be one of the fencing-sticks. This gave an indication to the locality of the other, and it came to light soon. When Caroline went back after the investigation, her chest was heaving with ominous quickness.

"The commotion has disturbed you, I fear," observed the major. "I'm really very sorry. These fencing-sticks——"

He was interrupted. Neel had come up to say that a visitor was below—Mrs. Dunn.

"Plague take it! who wants to see her?" cried the major. "Mrs. Dunn! I thought she was abroad."

"The family thought so too, sir," observed Neel, who considered the old family far more than he did the new one. "Mrs. Dunn came to Chilling yesterday, and surprised them."

"She's a horrid woman," cried the major. "Will you come down, my dear?"

"No," was Mrs. Dawkes's answer. "Just say, if you please,

Neel, that I am very tired and poorly. I do not feel equal to it."

"I can say that. I suppose I must go," grumbled the major, stalking off with his fencing-sticks.

Mrs. Dunn, in very fashionable foreign attire—quite a contrast to anything ever assumed by Keziah Dawkes—sat on a sofa in the grand drawing-room, to which Neel had shown her. There was no fire; at which she gave her head a disdainful toss, and remarked to Neel, that the ways of the house appeared to be altered.

"And so they are, ma'am," answered Neel, confidentially. "Miss Dawkes is manager."

"Oh! Mrs. Dawkes gives it up to her, then?"

"Mrs. Dawkes has never gave a single blessed order since she came into the house this last time," was Neel's reply. "She don't care who gives them, and who don't; she's too ill for it, ma'am."

Major and Miss Dawkes, the latter with her knitting, presented themselves together; and Mrs. Dunn condescended to give each in succession the tip of her forefinger. Neel could not despise these new people half as much as she did. The feeling peeped out in her manner too, in spite of her surface civility.

"Too ill to come down to me, is she!" cried Mrs. Dunn, receiving the apologies for the non-appearance of the Rock's mistress. "I hear she *is* ill, and I am sorry for her."

"Too tired to come, I said," corrected the major. "On the whole, she is rather poorly."

"If what I am told is true, she is a great deal more than poorly, Major Dawkes," retorted Mrs. Dunn. "Owen, with whom I was talking this morning, fears you'll not have her very long amongst you."

"Dear me!" cried the major, with a start of dismay. "But Owen always did look on the black side of things, I remember. *I* think her somewhat better than she was when I was here last."

"*You* know, I suppose, how it is—that she is alarmingly ill?" resumed Mrs. Dunn, turning the fire of her tongue on Keziah.

"I do not know that she is alarmingly ill," was Keziah's composed answer, given very slowly, for she was picking up some stitches in the everlasting knitting. "Mrs. Dawkes is certainly weak and languid; but I hope she will soon regain strength."

"It was the state she is represented to me as being in that brought me here this afternoon. I should have liked to see her, poor thing; I knew her when she was a child. It is her boy's death, they say, that has brought on her illness."

But the major denied this rather vehemently. His wife had been at death's door before the boy died, he observed; her lungs and chest were weak.

Mrs. Dunn left her sofa without ceremony, and took a seat that faced the Major and Miss Dawkes. It was this same magnificent room that had witnessed the contention about the will between Olive Canterbury and her father. Not an executed will at that time, only a purposed one. Caroline had no doubt remembered the scene often enough since, when sitting there.

"What did that boy die of, Major Dawkes?"

The question was a pointed one; especially so as Mrs. Dunn put it. Bending forward, her eyes fixed on the major, save when they wandered to Keziah, her voice low and full of meaning—it was thus she asked it.

"It's of no use to recall it now," replied the major, looking down on the rich carpet—out at the window—to the walls of the room. Anywhere except at her.

"But it is of use. I ask to know. You were in the midst of it; I was abroad, shut out from all news, except hearsay. As I remarked to Mr. Kage at our dinner-table last night, when I besought him to tell me."

"And pray what might he have told you, Mrs. Dunn?" inquired the major, not with so much polite indifference as Keziah would have liked to hear.

"He said he could tell me nothing, except what I knew before—that the doctors said the boy died from poison."

"Ah, yes," replied the major, "they did say it. But doctors are mistaken sometimes, and I think they were."

"That's rubbish, Major Dawkes," was Mrs. Dunn's com-

plimentary answer. "You don't really think so. The doctors could not have dreamt they found opium within the boy, if none was there. Do you mean to charge them with telling a falsehood?"

Keziah's knitting was trembling a little. But she kept her attention on it. As to her lips, they seemed to be compressed into nothing. Happening to glance at her, Mrs. Dunn thought she was unusually grey.

"I don't charge them with anything, Mrs. Dunn," resumed the major. "I only think they were mistaken."

"And I say I don't believe you think it. The opium was taken by the child, safe enough; it was proved so. What I want to ask you is—who gave it him?"

Keziah looked off her knitting and took up the answer. She could bear it no longer. Her lips were turning strangely white.

"That never was ascertained. It was proved beyond all dispute or doubt that the child had not taken anything of the kind; had not been in the way of taking it. It was an absolute impossibility that any such thing had come near him."

"An absolute fiddlestick," said Mrs. Dunn. "Of course it is to your sister's interest and yours, Major Dawkes, to uphold this view and stifle farther inquiry; but you cannot expect commonsense people to believe it."

"To my—my interest!" retorted the major, with a sort of stammer.

"To be sure it is. Haven't you come in for the child's money?"

"Certainly I have not," said the major, boldly. "The money reverted to the boy's mother, not to me."

"It reverted to her in name. Not, I expect, in fact. Who draws the cheques, pray? Major Dawkes, you cannot play at sophistry with me."

Major Dawkes rose and walked to the window with an air of easy carelessness, gazing out upon the setting sun. Keziah looked as if she were going to be sick.

"Had I been in England, I should have caused the investigation to be reopened," said Mrs. Dunn. "Mr. Kage, as the boy's trustee, was culpably careless not to enforce a

more searching inquiry. One would think it would be as satisfactory to you to come to the bottom of it, as to us," she added, throwing a full look after him.

"Immensely so," acquiesced the major. "I begged the medical men not to leave a stone unturned. The authority lay in my hands, not in Mr. Kage's; but he could have done no more than I did."

"Had I been he, I should have tried it. There's a secret in the matter somewhere, Major Dawkes, and it ought to have been got at. It ought to be still. For two pins, I'd reopen the inquiry myself."

"It would do no earthly good, and be a frightful amount of trouble," spoke the major, somewhat hurriedly.

"It would be a trouble, of course; but I think I should rather like it. He stood to me in the light of half-brother, absurd though it sounds to say it of a little fellow of that age."

"My firm persuasion is, that the boy died from nothing but his illness," said the major, in a candid tone, as he returned to his seat. "I went over the matter fully, point after point, at the time, and since, and I am quite unable, as my sister here knows, to arrive at any other conclusion. It was very much to be regretted that I was away from home."

"Well, it strikes me as being one of the most unaccountably mysterious cases I ever came across; nothing satisfactory about it in any way. But I can't stay to talk farther of it now," concluded Mrs. Dunn, rising to depart. "The Rectory people and Thomas Kage are coming in to dine with us, and I like to take my time in dressing."

"Is Mr. Kage's visit at Chilling to you?" asked the major, on the impulse of the moment.

"I suppose it may be considered to my sister Millicent; they are engaged to be married," she replied. And as Barnaby Dawkes heard the avowal, he felt as if a whole weight of lead had been lifted from his heart.

In an airy, graceful, sprightly manner, as though no care or dread had ever oppressed his soul, he attended Mrs. Dunn to the very extreme gates of the Rock, chatting amicably, and sending his respects to the Miss Canterburys. Keziah had disappeared when he returned, and he did not see her again

until dinner. They took the meal together; Caroline remaining in her own room.

"*That's* what has brought Kage down," he observed to Keziah, alluding to the information volunteered by Mrs. Dunn of the engagement to Millicent.

"Yes, Barby dear. I knew it had nothing to do with us."

"Wish him joy of her! I wouldn't like one of the Canterburys for my wife. And, Keziah—keep that woman, civilly, at arm's distance; the Dunn. Don't let her get near Caroline, if you can help it. Her tongue's made of fire."

"All right," nodded Keziah.

With the morning Mr. Kage started for London. The major stayed to see the coast clear of him, and then departed himself, his fears dispersed. Disagreeable doubts were over; and Barnaby Dawkes went gleefully back into the sunshine of the London streets, that to him might be said to be paved with gold.

CHAPER XL.

THE LAWYER'S SECRET VISIT.

Major Dawkes departed, and the Rock was its own quiet self again. A strangely monotonous abode now, its attractions, its fine rooms, its natural beauties, going for naught to those two silent women living in it—the one so hard and grey, something like a block of stone; the other passing swiftly and surely to the tomb that must soon incase her.

That each had her inward cares, was indisputable. Keziah was never quite free from a living dread—a dread of some vague danger on Barby's account—that would not quite keep itself down. It tinted the charming landscape, it gave a bitter taste to the dishes she ate of, it poisoned her pleasure, sleeping and waking. It seemed to her that this danger would pass with Mrs. Dawkes's life; once she was beyond speaking, the fear would be nearly over. Barby would be in full possession of the Rock and its large revenues then, and who might dare to breathe a slander on him?

Never a word had passed between her and her brother on that inconvenient subject, the death of the child; but Keziah, a shrewd sensible woman, had discerned odds and ends of things for herself. What Caroline knew or knew not, she did not dare to glance at. *Something*, she feared; else why the life of estrangement she had lived ever since from her husband, and which he acquiesced in as a matter of course, without a dissenting word? Strangers could not be more entirely separate than they were; and Mrs. Dawkes took no trouble to hide the fact.

There were moments when Keziah awoke out of her sleep in a great horror—a sleep in which she had seen Barnaby in the hands of men who are the administrators of England's criminal laws; and Caroline was invariably the Nemesis that brought him to his punishment. Keziah knew these were but miserable dreams, the result of the waking nightmare that was ever upon her, nevertheless her limbs would shake in the bed with terror, her hair be damp with a cold perspiration. There could be no true safety for Barby, or peace for her, until Mrs. Dawkes should have been removed from the world; and Keziah, whilst pitying her, saw every fresh sign of weakness with a feeling that was certainly not sorrow. Barnaby's sins might be very great; but he was dearer to Keziah's heart than all the rest of the world. Had the whole inhabitants of the globe been ranged on one side, and Barnaby on the other, she would have sacrificed them all to him, had there been need of it.

Major Dawkes might well return to town in full reliance on his sister. No undesirable visitors would be admitted to any private interview at the Rock; no opportunity afforded for so much as a documentary line being executed, let alone a will. Keziah was a sure and vigilant keeper. The strain on herself, taking one hidden thing with another, was great just now; but she looked for the time when it should be removed for ever, and she and Barnaby be at liberty to breathe again.

One great consolation attended it all; Caroline's state of inert apathy. It was quite apparent that she intended no active ill to her husband. It was equally apparent that never a thought of leaving her money away from him had place

within her. It sometimes crossed Keziah's mind to question whether Mrs. Dawkes remembered the fact that the disposal of her property lay in her own power.

What with Caroline's almost certain denial to visitors—between her own distaste for it and Keziah's manœuvring, that was sure to be the result when callers came—the Rock had been almost deserted before the time of Mr. Kage's visit. After his departure, Mr. Rufort took to come with rather inconvenient persistency. The fact was, Thomas Kage had told him he ought to see Mrs. Dawkes occasionally, considering the uncertain state of health she was in—or, rather, its too certain state; and Mr. Rufort acted on it. He got at length to see the mistress of the Rock, going in and out with tolerable regularity. But, like the doctor, he never got to see her alone. Just as Keziah invariably accompanied Mr. Owen to the rooms in the south wing, so did she accompany Mr. Rufort. Mr. Rufort hinted that he should like to be, in his capacity as Christ's minister, alone with the sick lady. Keziah practically refused to take the hint. She liked Mr. Rufort's visits, she said; they did her good. When Mr. Rufort said, that in praying with his sick parishioners he preferred to be alone with them, Keziah rejoined that she liked prayers. Mr. Rufort yielded: for Caroline besought him in a private whisper—with anxious eyes of entreaty, and a clasp of the hand to pain—not to insist on the point; at least, at present: time enough for it when she should be nearer death.

Mr. Rufort felt altogether a little puzzled, but said no more; and Keziah enjoyed the personal benefit of the prayers. Had Keziah Dawkes been told that her sister-in-law was, in one sense, acting a part, she had refused credence to it. With all her knowledge of human nature, its wiles and concealments, its tricks and its turns, she had never believed that Caroline was deceiving her; or that the weak woman lying in the south wing, to all appearance in utter inertness, in complete apathy, could be plotting and planning as anxiously as the best of them. But it was so.

Caroline set about what she had to do with more cautious dread than there was a necessity for. From the moment she had parted with Thomas Kage, the night of his secret visit by the

postern-door, her mind and brain had been incessantly on the rack, thinking how she could get Mr. Norris the solicitor to her. The unexpected visit of her husband startled her so effectually, that for some days she let the matter rest. Over and over again she asked herself the question: Had he suspected what she was about to do, and come down in consequence? Fully did Caroline believe that nothing, save watching over his own interests, would bring him away from London. The terror she had felt when he went to the lumber-closet in search of the fencing-sticks, she felt still. It had seemed a confirmation of her fears.

The major's departure, after only one clear day's stay, somewhat reassured her; but even then, for some days, she did not dare to move in it. The time came, however. And while Keziah was knitting fresh patterns into her woollen work below, congratulating herself, rather than the contrary, that her sister-in-law was passing more of her hours away than usual in inert listlessness, shut up alone in the south wing, with Fry within hearing of the silver bell, Caroline was up and doing. Not that the term "up and doing" could be applied to poor Caroline in any but the slightest degree

"My dear Mr. Norris,

"I have an urgent reason for wishing to see you, and to see you alone. It is essential that your visit to me should be kept entirely private, from my household as well as from people in general. Please *note this*. Will you be at the postern-gate of the south wing to-morrow evening at seven o'clock? Fry will be waiting for you, and bring you up to me. She will take this note to you, and carry back your verbal answer. I rely upon you, as my first husband's legal adviser, and I may add friend: I have no one else to rely upon. Be very cautious.

"Very sincerely yours,

"Caroline Dawkes."

Mrs. Dawkes sat reading this note after it was written. It was the third she had attempted. Neither of the others pleased her, and they were already in the fire.

"I think it will do," she murmured, as she folded and sealed it.

Fry had her instructions. It was necessary for Caroline to place some confidence in her; but she did not tell her what she wanted with Mr. Norris. Fry was trustworthy; and thought the little private programme as good as a play.

Caroline went down to dinner that day; she said she felt better. Keziah thought she looked it. The fact was that the excitement caused by the consciousness of what she was doing imparted some life and colouring to the faded countenance. Rather to Keziah's surprise, Caroline did not go up after dinner, but settled herself in an arm-chair. It was not often she dined below now; but if so, she went away when the meal was over. Of course, Keziah was full of congratulation; she talked to her sister-in-law, and read her a short story from a magazine. Just as it had concluded, Caroline was taken with a shivering fit, and Miss Dawkes rang for a warm shawl. Mr. Owen did not much like these attacks of shivering—they had come on three or four times lately. He thought, though, they were purely nervous.

"Where's Fry?" demanded Miss Dawkes, when the shawl was brought in by the upper housemaid.

"Fry's gone out, ma'am. She said she wanted to buy herself some aprons."

"She has no right to go out when she knows her mistress may want her at any moment," sharply returned Keziah. "Did she ask your leave, Caroline?"

"I forget," answered poor Caroline. "I heard her say she wanted some new aprons."

"She ought to have gone in the daytime," persisted Keziah, who had no notion of Fry's doing as she pleased without permission. "Suppose you had wanted to go to bed?"

"Don't be angry with her, Keziah. I keep her in so very much; except to church, she never goes out; and she must buy herself necessary things."

Keziah let the matter drop. Fry was gone, as the reader knows quite well, to Mr. Norris. It was only in the evening she could see him; for he was all day long at his office at Aberton. Fry had cleverly made the aprons the ostensible

excuse to the household. The reader may think that all comment might have been avoided by Fry's going out by way of the postern-door. But the truth was, poor Caroline had fallen into that nervous state, that she was afraid to be alone in the south wing after dark. What with the surroundings of little Tom's death (so dreadful to her imagination), and the reputation of the ghost that was wont to hover around the Lady's Well outside the windows, Caroline preferred company to solitude.

It was a bright starlight night when Fry went forth. Mr. Norris's residence was situated a little beyond the Rectory, as the reader may remember; for he once went to it with Miss Canterbury. She knocked at the door and asked for the lawyer.

"Not at home."

"Not at home?" retorted Fry, as if the man, an old acquaintance of hers, were telling a story. "Mr. Norris gets home before this."

"He do mostly. He's late to-night. Is it anything I can say to him?"

"No—I think not," replied Fry, as if in deliberation. "I just wanted to say a word to him myself. It can wait." But, even as she was speaking, Mr. Norris himself approached the door. He had come from Aberton by the usual train, but had called on some friend at Chilling.

"To see me, Fry? Come in, then. I suppose it's about that money you let your brother have?" added the lawyer, as he led the way to a sitting-room.

"Yes, sir," was Fry's bold answer, for the benefit of any ears that might be listening. "If he can't give me the money back, he might try and pay me interest."

But, when the door was closed, she presented the note in silence, and waited. Mr. Norris read it, glanced at Fry, and read it again.

"Do you know the purport of this?" he asked.

"Well, sir, I believe it is to ask you to come to the Rock to-morrow night; and I am to let you in by the postern-door."

"Just so. Your mistress says she wishes to see me."

He looked at Fry, and she looked at him. Each of them would have liked to speak out pretty freely to the other.

"I fancied that postern entrance was wholly unused, Fry. It's years since I've heard it mentioned; I'm not sure but I had half forgotten there was such an entrance."

"It was me that thought of it," said Fry, proud of being able so far to compliment her own memory. "There's folks in our house no better than watchful cats, and the servants be nothing but tattling gossipers."

"And your mistress is virtually a prisoner, eh, Fry?"

"Well, I don't know but she is, sir. For one thing, she don't seem to care to be anything else. As to the Rock, that was once so gay, it seems no better now than a dungeon. A rare bother I had to get that postern-door open. What message am I to take back, sir?"

"Say to Mrs. Dawkes that I will come. She mentions seven: at that hour I will be at the postern-door."

"All right," said Fry. "If you will come into the grounds, sir, by that little private gate on the south side, it will bring you past the Lady's Well to the postern-door; and you'll not be likely to meet anybody, my mistress says. I don't suppose you mind about what used to be talked of—that the way was haunted?"

"Not very much," said Mr. Norris, with a silent laugh. "I hear your mistress is looking very ill, Fry."

"She is just as ill as she looks," was Fry's answer. "It won't be long, sir, as far as I believe, before she goes after the poor child she's always regretting."

Mr. Norris saw Fry out himself, whispering to her a last charge, to be at her post in readiness for him on the following night. Fry dashed on to the general shop in the village—for her wanting the new aprons had been no false excuse—and went home with the checked muslin in triumph. Keziah said a sharp word to her—poor Caroline was in weary waiting for her bed—which Fry flung back again.

And when the next day came, circumstances seemed really to be favouring Caroline. She was so weak, and looked so ill, that Keziah, paying her morning visit, advised her not to move out of her room all day.

At dusk Fry was downstairs; and coming in contact with Miss Dawkes, said her mistress was still in bed, and had given

her orders to close up the green-baize door for the night, wishing for perfect quiet in the wing. Miss Dawkes nodded her head complacently, and told Fry to be cautious not to make any noise herself.

But the first thing Fry did, after bolting and barring the said door, was to assist her mistress to dress and proceed to the sitting-room. The fire burnt with a bright blaze, the room had its full amount of light. Caroline, sipping her tea, looked the only faded thing in it. She wore her usual black-silk gown—now much too large for her; it was covered with a shawl; and her beautiful hair hung carelessly. Excitement lent her both heat and colour. In the state of sickness she was, bodily and mentally, this coming interview with the lawyer, and what she must say at it, put her into a veritable fever.

"Fry! Fry!"

Fry came in at the nervous covert call.

"It is seven o'clock, Fry. You ought to be down at the postern-door."

Mrs. Dawkes had sat with her feverish eyes fixed on the mantelpiece clock. The hands were fast approaching the hour.

"It wants six minutes good, ma'am, by the right time; that clock is five minutes too fast. Mr. Owen said so when he was here to-day; and I know it besides."

"Mr. Norris's watch may be fast also. He must not be kept waiting, Fry."

"No fear. Them lawyers are never before their time, ma'am, unless it is to sue a poor man for money."

"Fry, I tell you to go down. Better for you to wait than for Mr. Norris. He might go away again."

Fry, grumbling a little, took her lamp, and went down. Waiting at that dusty door, with the wind moaning amidst the trees outside, and the ghost farther off—it was said to come always on a windy night—was not altogether agreeable. But she had not been there long when footsteps were heard, the boughs were pushed aside, and Mr. Norris stood there.

"All right," he said. "How is your mistress to-night?"

"She is just as fidgety as she can be, thinking I should not be down here in time, and you might go away again," was Fry's

answer. "I'll tell you what it is, sir: if the excitement of folks coming to her this way was to last, she'd just be in her grave before her time. All day long she has kept her bed, through nothing but the fever and worry she was in last night from knowing I had come to you. Can you see, sir? I'll go on with the lamp."

"These stairs don't get wider with age," remarked the lawyer, in a low tone.

"They are the steepest and narrowest stairs it was ever a lady's lot to go up or down," was Fry's answer; "which stands to reason, seeing they are built in the wall. I'd as soon come down a ladder: and sooner—there'd be less danger of pitching over."

"As I did once," said Mr. Norris.

"You!" exclaimed Fry, stopping to turn and look at him in the midst of the said stairs. "Were you ever here before, sir?"

"Yes; in the days of Edgar Canterbury. The place has never been dusted since that time, I should think, Fry. My gloves are covered."

"It has never been as much as opened, let alone dusted," answered Fry. "Here we are, sir."

With a light tread the lawyer stepped through the lumber-closet, and into the presence of Mrs. Dawkes. The shawl had slipped from her shoulders. Very thin and worn and shadowy did she look; and Mr. Norris could but contrast the poor faded thing before him with the beautiful and blooming girl whose entrance into the Canterbury family had caused so much trouble and heart-burning. He had hated the intruder in his heart of hearts, for a love of justice was implanted strongly within him; but in this moment his resentment passed away with a cry of pity, for he almost thought he was looking on the dead.

"Poor thing!" he involuntarily murmured, as he took her hand. "My dear, you are very ill."

"Yes," she answered, "the time is getting short now. That is why I was so anxious to see you."

Mr. Norris sat down by her, and they talked together in low tones. The consciousness of the necessity for secrecy lay upon them, otherwise both knew it was impossible they could be

overheard. Mr. Norris had been cognizant of the past troubles connected with Edgar Canterbury, and he knew this part of the house just as well as its present mistress. Caroline told him what she wanted—a will made that would in a degree repair the injustice of the last one. Without speaking with the express plainness she had used to Thomas Kage, Mr. Norris gathered a great deal. He nodded his head, and drew in his lips, and thought it was altogether about the most remarkable case he had ever come across.

"I could not die in peace if I did not make the will," she said with feverish lips. "I should never rest in my grave."

"My dear lady," he said, "there's no earthly reason why you should not make one. It's what you ought to do. As to that watchful person downstairs, I think we can manage to keep her in the dark. If you were in stronger health, I should advise a totally different course of procedure; but——"

"But I am not strong enough for it," interrupted Caroline with painful eagerness. "You mean open opposition, the asserting of my own position and rights; but if matters came to that, it would kill me."

"Yes, yes."

"Will you write down my instructions? I have thought of all I wish to do—and say."

Mr. Norris took some paper from his pocket, a pen, and a tiny ink-bottle. He began unscrewing the stopper.

"I suppose it will be legal?" she said.

He did not understand. "What legal? the will? Most certainly. Why should it not be?"

"I thought—because it is made in secret."

"As a great many wills are made. Trust to me for its being in due order. And now——"

What Mr. Norris was about to say received a most startling interruption—startling, at least, to one who heard it. It was a loud knocking at the green-baize door, followed by the voice of Keziah Dawkes. Caroline gave a faint cry. Were Mr. Norris to be seen with her, all was at an end. With her trembling hands clasped upon her bosom—with her poor face whiter than ashes—with steps that tottered as she stood, and a sick

faintness that seemed as if it must overpower her, Caroline looked forth.

"Don't answer, don't answer!" she breathed to Fry, who had appeared at her own door with a carelessly-defiant countenance.

"Not going to," nodded Fry, in a whisper. "Let her think I've gone to bed myself. That's right, Madam Dawkes; you can knock again."

"Fry! Fry!" cried out Keziah, "it's a letter for your mistress; it has 'Immediate' marked upon it." No response. Keziah went away grumbling. Things were come to a pretty pass, she thought, when servants went to bed at seven o'clock in the evening.

"All right, Madam Dawkes!" said impudent Fry; "you don't get over me. The letter will have to keep, though it came from the Pope of Rome."

But later, when Mr. Norris, his business for the night accomplished, had been escorted down the postern-stairs and was safely away, Fry went to Miss Dawkes with a face as bold as brass, asking whether, or not, anybody had knocked. She fancied to have heard it, but was engaged at the time with her mistress. And the letter proved to be nothing but a note from Mr. Owen, containing some instructions in regard to the medicine Mrs. Dawkes was taking that he had omitted to give in the morning when paying his visit to the Rock.

"Shall I get the will executed, or not?" murmured poor Caroline from her sleepless bed, when the household was hushed in sleep. "It seems a great chance. Perhaps Heaven will help me!"

CHAPTER XLI.

THE LAST AND FINAL WILL.

In the comfortable compartment of a first-class carriage, one of a train that was on its way to Chilling, sat Major Dawkes. It was not a cold day by any means, for spring sunshine lay on the earth, wooing the hedges to start into bud, the flowers to

blossom. But Major Dawkes liked to travel warmly, and a rich fur wrapper, lined with wool and scarlet silk, lay on his knees. His cheeks wore their usual bloom, his whiskers were of the same old purple richness, and the major was decidedly getting plump; but he composed his countenance to a grave sadness befitting the occasion, for he was hastening down to his wife's deathbed. At least, he would have told you he was hastening—as he did incidentally tell the old lady and gentleman seated opposite to him in the carriage—for he was rather given to indulging in little boasts of fiction. But the real fact was, that instead of hastening down, he had so contrived to retard his movements, that the closing scene would in all probability be over before he arrived. Which was what he secretly wished.

Mrs. Dawkes had lingered longer than was expected by herself, by her medical atttendants, or by any one about her. Strange somewhat to say, with the cold winter weather she had rallied a little. If it could not be said that she grew materially better, at least she did not appear worse. Her progress to the grave seemed to have made a halt—to have become for the time stationary. But the life she led was not any the less secluded; with the exception of the doctors and Mr. Rufort, she scarcely saw any one; visitors to her were, she acknowledged, utterly distasteful. The former restlessness of mind and manner had subsided, and given place to calmness. Very peacefully did she seem to wait for the coming death. Nay, to welcome it.

In February Mrs. Kage died. Keziah Dawkes, who took upon herself the ordering of matters, let her be buried without any needless ceremony. Neither Major Dawkes nor Thomas Kage was invited to attend the funeral. Caroline seemed not to care one way or the other, and did not interfere. Her poor mother was "better off," she said to Mr. Rufort, and it seemed to be her whole feeling in regard to it. So Keziah had it all her own way.

Later, Mrs. Dawkes began herself to droop again; and when it became apparent that the end was close at hand, Keziah sent up a telegram to her brother.

The major telegraphed back to say he was "on duty," but

would get away as immediately as he could. He had always made "duty" a standing excuse. Quietly suffering two days to elapse, the major then went down. The first person he saw at Chilling Station was Mr. Carlton of the Hall: quite a young man in activity still, in spite of his more than seventy years. He happened to be on the platform when Major Dawkes alighted. The latter (privately wishing him a hundred miles off) went up with outstretched hand and a face as long as a walking-stick, mournfully hoping his dear wife was better.

"She is dead," said Mr. Carlton, privately believing just as much and as little of the displayed concern as he chose.

"Dead! My wife dead!"

"She died at five o'clock this morning, Major Dawkes. So you are somewhat late, you see. Some of us thought you might have come earlier."

"Duty," groaned the major, bolting into the only fly waiting. "Dear me!—Richards, see to my portmanteau."

Keziah, grey in face as ever, but intensely calm, received him in one of the smallest and snuggest sitting-rooms. He went through the same farce here—the plea of "duty." *She* believed just as much as she chose; but she held his hand in hers, and murmured her heartfelt thanks that he, her ever-beloved brother, was free at last.

"Got any of the brown sherry up, Keziah?"

"Yes, dear."

"I'll take some." Miss Dawkes went and brought it in herself. The major drank two glasses of it at once, Keziah fondly watching him. "All's right, I suppose, Keziah?"

"All is quite right. But I don't exactly know what you mean."

"She expressed no wish at the last about the property, I suppose?"

"None. It was the same as usual to the last hour of her life—utter indifference to all worldly things. She never mentioned her property at all; I feel sure she did not so much as think of it."

"All's mine, then."

"Everything, Barby dear; *everything*."

The major tossed off another glass of the famous brown

sherry—the same that Mr. Canterbury in his lifetime used to boast of. Major Dawkes's head was strong; a few glasses more or less of good old wine made no difference to him.

"You see now the utility of my taking care that Caroline had no opportunity of making a will, Keziah. She might have got bequeathing some of her money to those Canterbury women."

"As if I should have allowed it!" responded Keziah. "Barnaby, it is an *immense* inheritance."

The major smacked his lips; partly at the sherry, partly at the suggested thought. He liked to be reminded that he was a millionaire. "You shall have a share in it, Kez. I shall set you up in comfort for life. This is real property, you see; what I came into when I married was only a limited income."

Keziah smiled. "Limited!"

"Well, it *was*; in comparison. The bulk of the property lay in Kage's hands then, as the child's trustee. I wonder what he'll think now—hang him! Have you seen anything of the fellow lately?"

"No. He has not been down since that one visit. When Mrs. Dunn went up to her house in London for Christmas, she took the Miss Canterburys with her; and they have not long come back again. Lydia Dunn is with them. Kage has written to Caroline two or three times, but she gave me the letters to answer."

"What was in his letters?"

"Nothing much. Inquiries after health, and that. It is all right, Barby; it has all been smooth as glass."

Barby stroked his whiskers complacently. Yes, it had all been smooth, his heart responded, and he was a great inheritor.

"I wish to goodness that miserable old woman was alive now, Keziah; our ancient aunt. She'd open her eyes at my wealth. Her own, that she grudged me, was a flea-bite by the side of it."

"I wish she was, Barby. It would give her a fit of the spleen."

There was a short pause. Major Dawkes turned and gave the fire a push with his boot.

"Did she suffer much at the last?"

"Oh no," was the reply, for Keziah knew he was speaking of his wife. "She drifted out of life very quietly and calmly."

The conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Mr. Rufort. Hearing of the major's arrival, he had come up to see him, having been charged with a note from Mrs. Dawkes. The major took it wonderingly, perhaps with some inward trepidation; but it proved to be a very harmless missive indeed—merely expressing some wishes about her funeral. She had first of all expressed them to Mr. Rufort in the presence of Keziah, though Keziah only partially gathered their purport, for she had been engaged at the moment in a wordy war with Fry. Mr. Rufort had suggested to Mrs. Dawkes that she should convey them in a note to her husband; and she so far complied as to pencil down the wishes on paper, put it in an envelope, and direct it to the major, charging Mr. Rufort to deliver it.

It appeared that she desired the same friends and relatives to attend her funeral who had attended her former husband's—Mr. Canterbury. She wished the Miss Canterburys to be invited to spend the day of the funeral at the Rock—as they had been at the former one—also Mrs. Rufort; and Mrs. Dunn, as she was staying at Chilling. In short, she directed that the arrangements for this funeral, with one notable exception, should be similar to the last that went out of the Rock. Mr. Canterbury had been put into his grave with all the pomp and pageantry of a theatrical show: she was to be taken to it with the smallest ceremony and expense that should be deemed consistent.

Major Dawkes, relieved of any private doubts, was all suavity. Had his late wife wished that the whole parish should be at the Rock that day, he would cordially have invited them.

"Your late wife's wishes appear very simple ones, Major Dawkes; I presume there will be no difficulty put in the way of their being carried out," observed the Rector.

"None in the world," heartily replied the major.

"She seemed to make a great point of it—the dying have these fancies, you know—and begged me to see them carried out. I told her I could only urge it upon you, major, and that she had better write to you herself."

"They are precisely my own wishes," spoke the complaisant major. "Only the half of any wish, expressed by my dear departed wife, I can but look upon as a solemn charge, strictly to be complied with. Perhaps you will oblige me by giving in the list of people yourself, Mr. Rufort. I was not at Mr. Canterbury's funeral, and might make a mistake over it."

But, in one sense, he had been at Mr. Canterbury's funeral. For he had watched the pageant along the road, and made his comments upon it. The recollection flashed into his mind now, bringing a flush to his face. His hopeless condition then, and his flourishing state now, were indeed a strange contrast.

"Who conducts the funeral?" he asked, turning to Keziah.

"I have given no orders," she replied. "I waited for you."

"I wonder who conducted Mr. Canterbury's?"

"I can tell you about that," said the Rector. "Young Mrs. Canterbury was inexperienced; and at her request Norris, the solicitor, undertook all the trouble of it, transmitting her wishes himself to the proper quarters. Of course he charged for his time."

"Then I think Norris had better undertake this one," spoke the major, in a fit of liberality. "You can write to him, Keziah."

In his anxiety that things should go smoothly, that all unpleasant reminiscences of the past should be kept down, as well as reflections on the present, Major Dawkes was eagerly desirous that these wishes of his wife's should be carried out to the letter. A conviction darted across him that it would be anything but agreeable to have the Canterbury family at the Rock on the day of the funeral, and he would very much indeed dislike the presence of Thomas Kage; but there was no help for it. If he refused compliance, how could he tell that something would not be made of it? Tongues were so venomous: and the very idea of any inquiry or unpleasantness turned him sick with an undefined fear. Refuse concession in this little matter, and people might ask how he had come into all the money, and what right he had to it.

No; the very consciousness that it might be suspected he had wished for his wife's death, made him all the more scrupulous, if only from prudential considerations, to carry out her wishes

to the extreme letter. Had they been transmitted to him in private, he would simply have put them and the paper they were written on into the nearest fire; but they came publicly, through the Honourable and Reverend Austin Rufort.

"I should have refused, Barnaby, had I been you," remarked Keziah, as she finished the note to Mr. Norris, after they were left alone. "It will be frightfully disagreeable to have the Canterbury family here."

"You are a fool, Keziah."

"For myself I don't mind; but I am sure you will not like it, Barby dear," she resumed, passing over in silence the compliment to herself.

"Don't you see there was no help for it?"

"Yes, there was. You are now sole master here, and need fear no one."

"I don't know about fear," said the major, dreamily. "One likes to stand well in the world's opinion. The invitation must be given to them, and Kage also; but I should think the Canterburys will not accept it. They must feel that they have no business here, and will be quite out of place. How she came to think of so foolish a thing is beyond me to imagine."

"Some idea of respect to their father and to them must have been floating in her weakened head, poor creature," surmised Keziah. "She was Mr. Canterbury's wife once, and would not have his daughters quite ignored at her funeral. I wish the day was over. Barnaby, if I were you I should let the Rock."

"I shall sell it," said the major, improving upon the suggestion. "If I can get my price for it."

He rather wished with Keziah that the funeral-day was over; and it was fixed for an early one. The presence of those ladies and of Thomas Kage would no doubt a little put him out of ease. But it could not last more than its appointed hours, and he determined to make the best of it, and act the host with courteous grace. The anticipation did not disturb him; he was in too gracious a mood for that. His golden dreams were at last realized, and with the death of his wife all tormenting dread had passed away. This magnificent mansion and its magnificent revenues were his; his only, as Keziah said. It was a costly nugget to have come into: and that there could

be any doubt that he *had* come into it, never for the faintest shadow of a moment crossed Major Dawkes's mind.

Once more a stately funeral issued from the Rock. In one respect Major Dawkes ignored his dead wife's commands, and abandoned the simplicity she had expressed a wish for. If the funeral procession was not quite of the gorgeous nature that had characterized Mr. Canterbury's, the show was at least sumptuous to look at. In a coach all to himself, following next the hearse, sat the bereaved major, black with all the trappings of woe. In the next were Thomas Kage and Austin Rufort; the latter attending as mourner and relative to-day, not as pastor. And so on, a string of coaches and carriages imposing to the eye.

George Canterbury's daughters had accepted the invitation to the Rock, very much to Major and Miss Dawkes's secret surprise, as well as to that of the neighbourhood. The only one of them who had fought against it was Mrs. Dunn. Millicent was passive as usual. Olive decided that they should go. After this day, all connection with the Rock and with the second family would be at an end, she observed; and it was well for the parting to have a peaceful feeling about it. Besides which, it was the last expressed wish of poor Caroline Dawkes, and therefore to be complied with.

So the four sisters, attired in suitable mourning, arrived at the Rock a short time before the hour fixed on for the funeral. They sat in the grand drawing-room—Olive, Mrs. Rufort, Mrs. Dunn, and Millicent. Keziah, in deep black, also was there, playing the hostess. Civility reigned, of course; but in spite of effort, the conversation flagged, only a remark being made now and then. Once Mrs. Dunn, in her free way, found fault with some arrangement at the lodge, saying their carriage had waited at least three minutes for the gates to be opened. She could not tell, for her part, why they were closed at all.

"The keeper is getting negligent," observed Keziah; "my brother intends to discharge him. There are several alterations and changes he means to make; but he thought it as well to let them be during Mrs. Dawkes's life."

No answer from any one. Mrs. Dunn had to bite her rebellious tongue though, which had a mind to tell Keziah that the power to make alterations before lay with the major's wife, not with him.

A weary while it seemed to wait. And, in truth, even Olive wondered why they should have been summoned to the Rock, and thought it was somewhat of a mistake. But the coaches were coming back at last, with their slow tread, bearing the immediate personal friends of the family. The comparative strangers were taken home direct from the churchyard. As the coaches stopped at the entrance, Major Dawkes (who had been privately hoping no one would alight) found that every one did alight, and that Norris the solicitor was taking upon himself to invite the company to enter. The major turned rather red, and would have liked to resent the liberty; but, in the face of the gentlemen, could not say he did not want them to come in.

Whilst he hesitated, Mr. Norris walked forward, threw open the door of the library—a room scarcely used since Mr. Canterbury's time—and marshalled the people to it: Lord Rufort and his son, Mr. Carlton and Mr. Kage. Major Dawkes brought up the rear, and politely asked them if they would like to sit down. He could not imagine why they need have entered, or what fit of officiousness had taken Norris. But Norris had disappeared. Only for an instant, when he came in with the ladies—Mr. Canterbury's daughters and Keziah. They all sat down; and then the lawyer addressed Major Dawkes.

"Shall we proceed now, sir, to read the will?"

Major Dawkes looked at him.

"Whose will?"

"Your late wife's, sir."

"Mrs. Dawkes made no will."

"Pardon me, major; Mrs. Dawkes executed a will, all in due order. She wrote to me a few days before her death, stating it would be found in the large drawer of this bureau, quite at the bottom, beneath the old leases and the other out-of-date papers."

The lawyer touched a piece of furniture as he spoke; but

the widower smiled with incredulity. The attention of the whole room was aroused, and drawn to Mr. Norris.

"There is no will, I tell you," persisted the major. "My wife never made one."

"Major Dawkes, she *did* make one."

"When and where?"

"In this house, some months ago," replied the lawyer. "I made it."

Miss Dawkes half rose from her seat. Her grey face had a scornful look on it; the gruffness of her voice was unpleasantly perceptible.

"Mrs. Dawkes made no will in this house; I can take upon myself to assert it; and you never were here, Mr. Norris."

"I beg your pardon, madam. I came here and took Mrs. Dawkes's instructions for a will. When it was prepared, I came again, and brought witnesses with me to attest her signature."

The words were spoken so calmly, in so matter-of-fact a tone, that the major was startled. He turned a look, full of evil, upon his sister.

"It is false!" she cried, utterly refusing credence. "It is a conspiracy concocted amongst the Canterbury family to deprive you of your rights, Barnaby. I will pledge myself to the fact that Mrs. Dawkes made no will. She could not have done so without my knowledge."

"Your not having been cognizant of this is easily explained, madam," returned Mr. Norris. "Mrs. Dawkes became possessed of an idea that she was not quite a free agent in her own house: certainly was not permitted to be so much alone as she desired to be. She therefore retired to the south wing, and caused the baize door to be erected to shut in her apartments. This, so far is patent to you and to all. Later, when she had occasion to see a friend or two in private, she ordered the small postern-door to be unfastened. It leads directly up to those apartments, and by that means she was enabled to receive her visitors. They were confined, however, to one or two. That is how I had access to her."

"The postern-door?" gasped Miss Dawkes, after taking in the sense of the lawyer's words with a sickening heart. "What postern-door? I did not know there was one."

"Possibly not, madam. You are, comparatively speaking, a stranger here. The door is hidden by trees, and has never been used of late years."

Major Dawkes, amidst a multitude of feelings that were anything but agreeable, began wondering whether he had ever known of the postern-door. At first he could not decide; but a thought began to dawn over him that he did once hear of this, and had afterwards forgotten it.

"I can assure you Mrs. Dawkes made her will," persisted Mr. Norris.

"And I can assure you she never did," uselessly persisted Keziah.

"The shortest way to settle it is to look in the drawer and see if there is a will," interrupted Mr. Carlton. "Norris told me, coming back in the coach, that I am one of the executors."

"You are," said Mr. Norris. "And Lord Rufort is the other."

Lord Rufort sat still in his chair, too stately to be moved by that, or by any other information; and there was a pause. "We wait, sir," he said to Major Dawkes.

Major Dawkes was at bay. "My lord, there is no will. I will equally pledge myself to it with my sister. It will be useless to examine the place."

"As you please, Major Dawkes," said Mr. Norris. "The will was made, and signed, in duplicate; and I took charge of the other copy. 'To guard against possible accidents,' Mrs. Dawkes said. I have it with me."

Major Dawkes, foiled, and doubly at bay, searched for the key and opened the drawer. There was the will. He could have gnashed his teeth, but for those around. He sat down, and bit one of the fingers of his black-kid glove.

"She may have left half the money away from me," he murmured in Keziah's ear, dashing his hair from his damp brow.

Mr. Norris opened the deed and put on his spectacles. The will began by premising that no person whatever was a party to its contents: that it was the testatrix's own uncounselled act and deed, biassed by a sense of justice alone. There were a few legacies to servants and friends; the largest

was one, fifty pounds a-year, to the nurse Judith for her life, and for her disposal at death; and there was a command that the remains of her little boy should be brought from the cemetery at Brompton, to be finally laid by herself and his father.

Mr. Norris then cleared his throat, and the major turned red with expectation.

"I bequeath this mansion, the Rock, and all that it contains —plate, furniture, books, pictures, together with the lands and revenues pertaining to it—to Olive Canterbury, absolutely. I bequeath the whole of the money of which I may die possessed, the remainder of the lands, the houses (save and except the Rock), to the four daughters of my late husband, George Canterbury, to be shared by them in equal portions. I bequeath to Thomas Kage my gold watch and chain, with the locket, key, and seal attached; and I beg him to accept them as a token of gratitude for his unvarying kindness to me and his solicitude for my best welfare. And I bequeath to my present husband, Barnaby Dawkes, the sum of five-and-twenty pounds, wherewith to purchase a mourning-ring, which he will wear in remembrance of my dear child, Thomas Canterbury."

Such, shorn of its technicalities, was the substance of the will. An intense silence prevailed in the room. The surprise of all present was so great, that every tongue was tied. Only with their eyes did people look at each other, and seem to question whether it was a dream. Major Dawkes sat, a pitiable object to look upon, like unto a man who has received his death-blow. Suddenly the perspiration, great drops of it, began breaking out on his livid face. Was it the fact of his entire disinheritance, or the peculiar allusion to Thomas Canterbury, that caused his face to wear that deathly hue? He was a ruined man: yesterday he stood on a pinnacle, vaunting his wealth and position; to-day he was hurled from it, and hurled from it for ever. He felt reckless.

"I dispute the will!" cried he, in his desperation. "Mr. Norris, you will take my instructions preparatory to setting it aside."

Mr. Norris smiled. "You forget that I am solicitor to the Canterbury family. I presume I may say so much?" he added, turning to Miss Canterbury.

Olive bowed.

"Why, you might just as well tell the sun not to shine, as attempt to set aside a plain will like that, major," cried Mr. Carlton. "Though I sympathize with your disappointment, Dawkes," he added, "I cannot imagine how you could so mortally have offended your wife, as to be cut off with nothing."

"Very strange indeed!" remarked Lord Rufort. And "Very strange indeed!" murmured every one else, with the exception of the lawyer and Thomas Kage.

Mr. Rufort stepped forward, and held out a small parcel towards Mr. Kage. "It is the legacy mentioned in the will," said he; "the watch and chain. Mrs. Dawkes gave it into my charge to convey to you."

And Thomas Kage rose and took it, a vivid flush of bygone recollections dyeing his face.

"I wonder you had not a better memento than that; a good thumping sum of money, for instance," exclaimed the unceremonious Mr. Carlton to Thomas Kage. "You were her nearest relative, except her mother; her only relative living. The chronometer is valuable, but counts for nothing as a legacy."

"In legacies from friends we do not look at value, Mr. Carlton," was Thomas Kage's reply, given in low tones.

But Miss Dawkes, only now beginning to recover her scattered senses, could not let the matter rest. She must fight it out to the last.

"When my brother gives it as his opinion that this will has been concocted, he only states what is no doubt the fact. Perhaps *you* were her adviser, sir?"—turning sharply on Mr. Rufort.

"Indeed, no," Mr. Rufort quietly replied. "I had nothing to do with the will in any way. Mrs. Dawkes once said to me that her pecuniary affairs were settled, and that is all I ever heard. Had any one asked me, previous to this hour, to whom her fortune was most likely left, I should have answered, to her husband. I never supposed there was a doubt that he would have it."

"Were you one of the visitors we now hear of as sneaking in through the postern-door?" continued the angry lady.

"Certainly not. There was no necessity for it. I never knew the postern-door had been unfastened. Allow me to remind you, Miss Dawkes, that you invariably made a third at my interviews with Mrs. Dawkes, up to the last," pointedly concluded Mr. Rufort. "Had she wished for any private conversation with me, or I with her, the opportunity was not afforded for it."

True; very true. Keziah drew in her thin lips as she mentally acknowledged it. And oh! of what avail had been all the precaution? Of all moments of Keziah's life, this was perhaps the most hopelessly miserable.

A general rising to leave shortly took place. To say the truth, neither the Canterbury family nor the Dawkeses felt at ease. That this was but a restitution of the justice so long diverted, Olive knew; but it seemed to be harder than it need have been on Major Dawkes. Unless—a suspicion was crossing her mind that she started from with horror; and would willingly have put far away, but that thoughts are not under our own control. Mr. Norris approached the major.

"You will be prepared to give up possession at your earliest convenience, major," he said. "Not at your inconvenience, you know: I am sure Miss Canterbury would not wish that."

And perhaps, of all the shocks he had received during the past half-hour, this practical one was the most startling. Give up possession? Ay, give up possession of all. Major Dawkes's day was over.

It seemed impossible to realize it. Watching the carriages away, through the half-raised blind, it seemed simply impossible that it could be reality. A man of almost unlimited wealth when he rose that morning; his, the fair domain, stretched out far and wide; numerous servants who called him master; carriages and horses at his sole command! And now, all had been dashed down at one fell swoop, and he was—what he was. Turning to Keziah with a stamp and an evil frown, he cursed her. It was something to have an object to throw blame upon. Cursed her want of vigilance, that he said had wrought the mischief.

"Stay, Barnaby," she interposed. "The fault lies with you—if anywhere; certainly not with me. I could not *divine*

there existed a private door to the wing; there was no inspiration to tell it me. If you knew of it, you should have warned me."

Ay. But then his memory had played him treacherously.

"It appears to me to be just one of those unhappy chances of life for which there is no human prevention," resumed Keziah, her tone low from intense inward pain. "I would *never* have failed you, Barnaby, fair play being given me; but how could I combat with shadows that I did not know existed?"

Must he give all up? Was there no possible loophole by which he could right matters again—or at least fight for it? The major was deeply engaged in this mental calculation when Mr. Norris came into the room. Instead of departing with the others, he had remained to give sundry private charges to Neel, as to the looking closely after valuables. He trusted neither the major nor Miss Dawkes.

"I have resolved upon my course of conduct," spoke the major, overcoming his surprise; for he too thought Mr. Norris had departed. "Mrs. Dawkes was, beyond all doubt, insane when she made the will; that is, so mentally weakened as not to be of lucid capacity. On those grounds, I shall dispute it."

Mr. Norris sent Miss Dawkes from the room, saying that he must speak a word to her brother in private. He made the major sit down, and drew a chair for himself in front of him.

"Look here, Major Dawkes," he whispered, in a cautious tone; "your best and only policy will be to give up quietly. I say this for your own sake. Lying down deep in a chest of mine is another paper of your wife's, not a will. She wrote it lest some such contingency as what you speak of should arise. I have not read it; it is signed and sealed; and my word is passed to your dead wife that that paper shall never see the light of day, and that human eye shall never rest on its contents, unless you force it. It contains a full and explicit statement of the causes and reasons for her disinheriting you. I guess what they are. In fact, I gathered them from her, perhaps unintentionally on her part, when she was giving me the directions for her will. I fancy Mr. Kage could say something, and the

nurse-girl, Judith. This is private information to you. Take my advice: we lawyers have to give such sometimes, you know; and I shall never speak of it to living soul. That paper, in your own solemn interests, must not be dislodged from its resting-place. You, perhaps, know what the consequences would be. It would not be a question of the loss of property then, major, but of something more. If I speak plainly, it is for your own sake. Make no fight; don't stir up muddy waters."

The major's eyes were bent on the ground, and his face wore again its livid tinge. But Mr. Norris, accustomed to read countenances, saw that all idea of opposition was perforce abandoned. Oh, they were bitter—the pills that unhappy sinner had to swallow!

"And you will give up possession, major. Miss Canterbury said at your convenience; I say do it *soon*. It will be more agreeable for you, I feel sure, to be away from here. What I looked in to say was, that I considered it my duty to place Neel in charge, as it were, of the family valuables and that. This is a very exceptional case, you see, Major Dawkes; so I hope you will pardon exceptional measures. And look here: I have no ill-will to you, Heaven knows. Man gets led into all sorts of queer corners thoughtlessly; and if I can do you a good turn, I will. Miss Canterbury is of a nobly-generous nature, and it may be she would do something for you, if she were asked. There!"

The lawyer disappeared with the last words, waiting for neither comment nor answer. Major Dawkes sat on, still as a statue, plunging into a vista of the future—a future encompassed about with the stings of remorse and bitter disappointment. What had he gained by that dark deed he had accomplished in secrecy and silence? Not the golden Utopia, the luxurious freedom he had pictured to himself; but poverty, and guilt, and shame. His wife gone—her money gone—the Rock gone—position gone—all the good things were wrested from him for ever! And Major Dawkes started up wildly, and pulled at his hair with vengeful hands, as the thought suddenly flashed over him that, but for that woful deed, he would have been revelling in them yet.

It is often thus. Satan lures us on to commit evil that good may come, and then turns on us with a mocking laugh. Of all men living, perhaps Major Dawkes was in that hour the most miserable.

CHAPTER XLII.

CONCLUSION.

THOMAS KAGE had left the Rock in the Miss Canterburys' carriage. Mrs. Dunn would go with the Rector and his wife. Scarcely a word was spoken on the way home. The strange event of the day seemed very startling yet.

"Shall I come in?" he asked when he had assisted them to alight. And he spoke it with so much deprecation, that Olive looked at him.

"Shall you!" she repeated. "Why should you not?"

"What has passed this morning bars my right to do so—at least, on the previous footing," he continued when they had entered. "Millicent," he added, turning to her, "this is a cruel blow; for it ought, in justice, to deprive me of you. But it is only what I looked for."

"What now?" cried Olive.

"I possess, by dint of scraping and saving, a thousand pounds laid by in the bank, to purchase chairs and tables. Millicent is now worth, at least, a hundred thousand—how much more, I dare not guess. Can I, in honour, still hold her to her promise to become my wife?"

Millicent Canterbury turned red and white, and hot and cold, and finally burst into tears. Olive, on the contrary, felt inclined to laugh.

"It is the first time I ever heard a rising barrister—looking forward to the Woolsack, no doubt, in his own vain heart—say that a hundred thousand pounds was a thing to reject or quarrel with. Would you have liked it to be a million, sir?"

"Miss Canterbury!"

"Ay, Miss Canterbury indeed! Look at Leta. I dare say

she has had her visions, as well as you. The Lord Chancellor and his wig rule England, and she rules the Lord Chancellor, may have been one of her ambitious visions for the far-off future. No slight temptation to a young lady, let me tell you Mr. Kage. And now you want to upset it all!"

"It is the money which upsets it."

"Poor child!" cried Olive, advancing and stroking Millicent's hair; "you have cause for tears. He says he will not give you a home now; and I am sure I will not give you one. I won't harbour a rejected and forlorn damsel at the Rock."

"You are making a joke of it," he said; and that she should do so rather jarred upon his very serious mood.

"Of all fastidious men you are the most absurd, sir. I don't suppose it is the first time the accusation has been brought against you."

"What would you have me do, Miss Canterbury?"

"Do!" she echoed, in a changed tone. "Ask Millicent. Money separate you! What next? I never was ashamed of you until now, Thomas Kage."

She left the room; and the next minute Millicent was sobbing on his breast. Separate, indeed!

With a commotion of rustling skirts, in came Mrs. Dunn, who had chosen to alight at Thornhedge Villa instead of going on to the Rectory. Millicent was then seated, her face bent over a book held upside down. Thomas Kage was looking demurely from the window.

"Olive! Where's Olive? I want Olive. Why, Leta, you look as though you had been crying!"

"I!" stammered poor Leta.

"I'm sure it's nothing to cry about," reprimanded Mrs. Dunn, who had not parted with her propensity to set the world to rights. "Poor Caroline Dawkes had been as good as dead so long, that one can't feel it much at last. Don't be stupid, child. Oh, here you are, Olive!"

Olive would have liked them to have a few minutes' conversation to themselves, that they might get reconciled to the new state of things; and she thought Mrs. Dunn was a great marplot. But there was no help for it. Miss Canterbury sat down by Mr. Kage, and began talking.

Mrs. Dawkes's will, in a different way, is as strange a one as my father's," she observed to him. "Can you account for it?"

"I do not wish to account for it," was the evasive reply of Thomas Kage.

"There's one part I can't account for, and that is why she should have cut off her husband absolutely," put in Mrs. Dunn. "Who can?"

There was no reply. She had not addressed the question to any one in particular, so an answer was saved. Miss Canterbury was occupied with her jet chain; Thomas Kage had turned to the window again.

"One thing strikes me as being remarkably curious," pursued Mrs. Dunn. "That Mrs. Garston at the last altered her will, so that the pittance she left the major should be paid to him weekly. It was just as though she foresaw what has come to pass, and would secure him from absolute starvation."

"Yes, that was curious," warmly assented Thomas Kage, a strange light in his luminous eyes.

"It strikes me that you know more than you will tell us, Mr. Kage," she rejoined, suddenly.

"That I know more? What of?"

"Why, of the *reason* for Mrs. Dawkes's cutting him off. He was her husband: no one can deny that. I see you won't admit anything, Mr. Kage. You law-people are closer than wax. But I have my own thoughts about it now and again. Odd ones, too."

"I cannot help feeling sorry for Major Dawkes," observed Olive. "His present position must be a pitiable one. As to its cause—I mean his wife's motive—I do not think we are called upon to speculate upon it, Lydia."

"He'll leave the army—that's a matter of course," went on Lydia. "He and Keziah will club their means together, and go over the water and live. You'll see. He has his four pounds a-week; she has about the same. They won't quite starve."

"No, I must take care of that," murmured Miss Canterbury. "I think, with Mr. Carlton, that it is very strange Caroline left nothing to you," she added to Thomas Kage. "I have a suspicion that you prevented it yourself."

"I told her I would not accept it if she did."

"But why?"

"The money, in point of right, was not Caroline's to leave; and what claim had I on Mr. Canterbury's property?"

"A small slice of it would not have been missed."

"Perhaps not," he said; "but I had no claim to a slice, small or large. No; I would not have accepted a shilling."

"Well, you *are* fastidious," cried Olive, looking at him; "chivalrously honourable."

"I think I am only just, Miss Canterbury."

"But oh, what a strange thing it is, that our own money should have come back to us!" she exclaimed, with enthusiasm. "I cannot yet realize it: when I wake up to-morrow morning, I shall not believe it's true. It did not bring altogether luck or happiness to those to whom it was left when papa disinherited his own people."

"Indeed it did not," warmly replied Thomas Kage: and he knew it, far better than she did. "Be assured of one thing, Miss Canterbury: that an unjust will never prospers the inheritors. All my experience in life has proved it to me."

And be you assured of it also, my readers, for it is a stern truth. Look out for yourselves in life, and mark these cases. Years may go by, all apparently flourishing; justice may seem to have folded wings; but when the final result shall come—as it surely will—you will see what it brings. Over and over again has the bitter truth been spoken—"It brought no blessing with it."

Summer sunshine lay around the Rock; summer brightness upon it. The old family were within its walls again, and wrongs had been righted. There had been no trouble. Major Dawkes had given up early possession, betaking himself off one morning quietly with Keziah at his heels. He was no longer major now, except by courtesy. As Mrs. Dunn predicted, he had made haste to sell out of the army, never again to re-enter it; and had taken up his residence across the Channel with his sister, on a very fair and sufficient income. Were men generally rewarded here in accordance with their deserts, Major Dawkes might, perhaps, have confessed to himself that, after all, he was more lucky than he deserved to be.

Not quite all the family back again at the Rock who had been turned out of it; for Miss Canterbury alone was left of them. Mrs. Rufort was at the Rectory; Millicent was already on the verge of entering a new home. For this was the wedding-day—as might be seen by the gay carriages passing to and fro, and the gala dresses within them. In vain Millicent had pleaded for a quiet wedding; in vain Thomas Kage had threatened to run away with Leta beforehand if they were to be subjected to display: Miss Canterbury willed it otherwise. They had had enough of quiet weddings, she said, and decided for a grand one. A gracious mistress she, reigning in her own birthplace, the Rock; but rather an autocrat still in the matter of taking her own way. And grand it was, especially considering that two lords were at it.

Lord Rufort begged to be allowed to give the bride away. Percival, Earl of Hartledon, invited himself, and came down with Mr. Kage—the two close and confidential friends of many years. Richard Dunn and his wife Sarah came to it; Lydia Dunn was of course there, busier and finer than any one. Lord Rufort's stiffness had somewhat relaxed of late; for the fortune his daughter-in-law had come into afforded him the most intense gratification. But the ceremony was over, and the breakfast was over, and the bridal-carriage was at length off amidst its cloud of old shoes. The outdoor groups were cheering, the church-bells were ringing.

"Thank goodness, it's at an end," laughed Thomas Kage, as he leaned back in the carriage, leaving the noise and excitement behind. "Leta, I vow I'll never get married again."

"I think one time quite enough," she answered, with a shy laugh, and a blush.

"Farewell to Chilling," he murmured, three parts to himself. "Farewell to all the old reminiscences, sad ones most of them, that the place has wrought into its history. Henceforth we begin a new life, Leta. I trust a happy one."

"I am sure of it," she breathed.

"Ay, yes; with Heaven's blessing."

A very short bridal tour was to be theirs, for Thomas Kage had chosen to get married in the busy season when the law courts were sitting, instead of waiting sensibly for the autumn.

And then the house that had been Mrs. Garston's would receive them, henceforth to be their home.

The sunshine lay, white and calm, on the road; the birds sang; the swallows dipping as they flew; the yellow corn was ripening; the summer flowers threw up their sweet perfume; the trees waved gently against the blue sky; the mountains basked in their hues of light and shade: on all things there seemed to rest a holy gladness, speaking to the heart of peace.

And the horses, spanking along, carried the chariot away in the distance.

THE END.

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